

Change across generations — the patterns that repeat

A Now I See It downloadable resource on dealing with change

How each generation absorbed major change in their formative years, and what that teaches us about the change happening now

Opening: The Myth of the Unprecedented

Every generation believes the change it's living through is entirely new.

When the Boomers saw the end of the Cold War in their fifties, they looked at the children around them and said "you have no idea how unprecedented this is." When Millennials watched the financial system crater in 2008 and saw the gig economy arriving in their thirties, they thought the ground had shifted in ways their parents couldn't possibly understand. Gen Z watched social media childhood and COVID school closures and learned that change was just weather — constant, impossible to stop, something you survive rather than shape.

And in each case, there was something unprecedented. But not in the way each generation thought.

The patterns don't change much. What changes is the *specifics* — the technology, the scale, the pace, the institutions involved. But how people actually absorb change, resist it, eventually integrate it, and later pretend they saw it coming? That part rhymes across generations. Recognising the rhyme helps leaders and educators who work across multiple cohorts. It doesn't make change easier. But it makes it legible.

And legibility is the first step toward respect.

The Generations and Their Formative Changes

The Silent Generation and Pre-Boomers (born ~1928–1945)

The formative events: These cohorts came of age during the tail end of World War II or its immediate aftermath. For many, the war itself was the defining experience — either living through it or returning home to a completely reshaped society. The transition from agrarian to industrial work was still unfolding; for many families, this generation moved to cities for factory work or stayed in rural communities that were mechanising. They watched the moon landing in 1969 when many were already in their forties, less as a personal milestone and more as distant proof that the world had modernised.

The pattern: Change was something done to you by large institutions — the government, the military, the company you worked for. You didn't negotiate with change; you endured it. If the factory moved, you moved. If the war ended, you came home and got on with it. Institutions were trusted to know what they were doing, even if you didn't like it. Loyalty to a single employer for your entire

working life was the normal path; it was a form of dignity. Stoic endurance was valued language: "you just did what needed doing" and "you didn't complain."

What this means now: This generation is largely retired, but many are still in senior advisory or governance roles. When they hear change initiatives, they often listen for clarity on what the new rules are — not to be convinced to agree with them, but to understand what they're expected to do. They may resist new tools not because they're anti-technology, but because they've invested decades in mastering the old way and see little reason to become a beginner again. That's rational, not stubborn. They often need explicit permission to be slow with change, and they respect leaders who don't pretend the transition will be painless.

Baby Boomers (born ~1946–1964)

The formative events: This generation came of age during extraordinary social turbulence. Vietnam dominated their early adulthood — either fighting it, protesting it, or watching friends do one or the other. The civil rights movement meant that race and justice became actively contested in the streets and in politics in ways previous generations had mostly left to institutions. Women entering the workforce in large numbers was both a Boomer achievement and a Boomer shock. The Cold War framed their entire childhood and early adulthood, with the space race offering a counternarrative of hope and possibility. Many of them were in mid-career when the Cold War actually ended, and again in mid-career when the personal computer arrived and the internet became real.

The pattern: This generation learned that change was something to argue about and that protest was a legitimate tool. They established the expectation that individuals could shape the systems around them — or at least that they should try. They were the first generation in large numbers to believe that "work" and "identity" were the same thing; your job wasn't just what you did, it was who you were. Change often felt like betrayal if the institution didn't consult them or if it moved in directions they hadn't approved. They had high expectations that their voice would matter in how things unfolded.

What this means now: Boomers are now mostly in senior leadership or recently retired. In leadership roles, they often expect to shape change rather than simply execute it — and this can be both a strength (they bring conviction and historical perspective) and a friction point (they may not accept decisions made without their input). They often have strong opinions about the "right" way to do things and may resist change that contradicts their established values. But they also value mentoring and passing their knowledge on. Respect their need to understand the "why" behind change, and they're often effective change leaders themselves, provided the change aligns with their values.

Generation X (born ~1965–1980)

The formative events: These people had latch-key childhoods at a time when that was unusual and sometimes seen as neglectful. Divorce was normalised during their childhood — their parents were divorcing at high rates when this had previously been rare. The end of the Cold War happened

during their early adulthood, which was genuinely anticlimactic after decades of existential tension. They came into the workplace just as personal computers and early internet were arriving — some learned on typewriters and transitioned to screens in their twenties, others grew up with computers already present. They lived through the dot-com boom and the spectacular dot-com bust. And 9/11 happened when they were in their thirties to early forties, already established in careers and families.

The pattern: "I'll believe it when I see it." This generation developed deep skepticism of institutions and large promises. The Boomers told them they could have it all, and then they watched the economic rug get pulled out from under them in 2008. They learned self-reliance early — latch-key kids don't wait for adults to solve problems. They don't expect employers to be loyal to them, because they watched loyalty evaporate across industries. They're often highly competent but quietly so, without the need for affirmation. They're suspicious of change initiatives that sound good on paper because they've seen too many that collapsed in practice.

What this means now: Gen X is now in a lot of mid-to-senior leadership roles, and they're often the most pragmatic people in the room. They're not opposed to change; they're opposed to bullshit about change. They want to know what the actual costs are, who pays them, and whether anyone's actually thought through the second-order effects. They work best when you give them space to experiment and report back, not when you ask them to buy in before they've tested something. They often prefer written communication to meetings. They're deeply skeptical of motivational speeches but responsive to clear information and acknowledgement of real tradeoffs.

Millennials (born ~1981–1996)

The formative events: This generation grew up with the internet arriving during their childhood or early adulthood — they remember life before and after, which gives them a unique vantage point. They got smartphones in their twenties and thirties and watched social media become the default way humans connect. They hit the job market right into the 2008 financial crisis, which was genuinely traumatic. Many have heavy student debt. They grew up hearing that they could be anything they wanted, then discovered that the economy had other ideas. The gig economy emerged during their career years, alongside the collapse of the expectation that one employer would employ you for life. Many are also the first generation to be fluent in thinking about climate change as a real, ongoing crisis rather than a future threat.

The pattern: Change is constant, and institutions keep breaking their promises, so don't expect change to make things better — expect it to be necessary. There's deep skepticism of long-term promises from employers. They expect meaning at work; if your job doesn't feel like it matters, they'll leave. They're often willing to experiment with new approaches because they have low faith that old approaches will save them. But they're also burned-out in a particular way: they've experienced so much change that it's exhausting. They want change initiatives to acknowledge that yes, this is disruptive, yes, it costs something, and yes, here's what the payoff is.

What this means now: Millennials are now in early-to-mid career leadership, and they often bring both capability and exhaustion to change initiatives. They're willing to do hard things, but they want

to know the honest reason why. They value transparency about costs and honest acknowledgement of tradeoffs. They're often good at seeing patterns across changes (because they've seen so many) and can offer useful perspective on what's actually new vs. what's another iteration of an old problem. They're skeptical of anyone who promises that this change will be "the last one" — they know better.

Generation Z (born ~1997–2012)

The formative events: These people have no memory of the pre-internet world. Smartphones and social media were present during their entire adolescence and young adulthood. Many of them went through school during the normalized surveillance of social media — their childhood is partially documented online in ways previous generations' wasn't. COVID hit during their school years or early career, disrupting education and first jobs in ways they had no precedent for. Mental health language is fluent for them in ways it wasn't for previous generations; they talk about anxiety, depression, and trauma in straightforward ways. And now, as they're entering or in the early years of the workforce, AI is arriving as a tool that's just... there, integrated into software they use daily. No transition period, just: this is your tool now.

The pattern: Change is the only constant they've known, and they're often weary of being told to be excited about the next new thing. They have lower tolerance for nonsense and don't hide their skepticism well. They're more likely to voice concerns directly. They often have developed mental-health language and will name burnout, overwhelm, and exhaustion explicitly rather than pushing through silently. They expect personalisation in tools and systems; top-down one-size-fits-all approaches feel wrong to them. They're often highly collaborative and more attuned to inclusion and equity issues than previous generations, not because they're more virtuous but because it's the framework they grew up in.

What this means now: Gen Z is now entering mid-career roles and leading teams for the first time. They often bring clarity about what doesn't work and willingness to ask "why are we doing it this way?" They're less likely to follow a change initiative just because authority says so. They need the logic to make sense, and they need to see it being applied fairly. They get burned out fast if change initiatives are poorly designed or if the costs fall on the people with the least power. They're often highly valuable in change design because they'll flag the parts that don't make sense. But they also sometimes expect perfection on the first try and can be impatient with the messiness of real organisational change.

Generation Alpha (born ~2013+)

The formative events: These are the children being educated now. AI co-pilots are already present in their tools — not arriving, but present from the start. Climate change is background reality, not future threat. The pandemic happened during their early childhood; many have no coherent memory of a pre-pandemic world. They've never known a world without smartphones in classrooms. They're growing up with personalized recommendations, adaptive content, and systems that learn their preferences. They have extremely low patience for top-down narratives that don't feel personalized

to them.

The pattern: Patterns are still forming, but early signs suggest: tech is environmental, not tool-like. They don't think of AI as a separate thing to adopt — they think of it as part of how systems work. They have very high expectations for personalisation. They get frustrated fast with generic content or one-size-fits-all instruction. They'll abandon something that doesn't feel attuned to them much faster than previous generations. Top-down narratives land poorly; peer-voice and evidence land better. They're used to high production quality and fluid interaction.

What this means now: Gen Alpha is mostly not yet in the workforce, but they're the students and children that educators and leaders are working with now. For educators especially, this means: pre-recording quality matters more than it did. Personalisation and student choice matter more. Generic instruction slides off them. They expect to see themselves in materials and examples. They want to know why they're learning something in concrete, applied terms. When you introduce change to systems they're in — whether that's a new app, a new curriculum, a new classroom practice — the adoption barrier is much higher if it doesn't feel personal or if it feels like "another generic initiative."

The Pattern That Repeats Across All Generations

Despite the vast differences in formative events and worldviews, every generation experiences the same basic sequence when change arrives:

First: loss before gain. Something familiar is taken away or stops working the way it did. The skilled professional finds their expertise is suddenly less valuable. The process everyone knew becomes obsolete. The tool you mastered gets replaced. For a time, everyone feels less competent. Pretending this isn't true doesn't help. Acknowledging it honestly does.

Second: suspicion of authority overpromising. Leaders almost always describe change as better than it actually is in the early stages. We want to believe we're making progress, so we accentuate the positives and minimize the costs. Every generation has learned not to trust this completely. The Silents watched it happen with mechanisation. The Boomers with corporate restructuring. Gen X with every tech transition. Millennials with the gig economy as "freedom" and climate solutions as "just around the corner." Gen Z watches it with AI. The pattern: leaders oversell; people adjust their expectations downward; actual results eventually land somewhere in the middle; people act like they always knew it would be roughly this way.

Third: uneven adaptation. Some people take to change quickly. Some resist tenaciously. Most muddle through somewhere in the middle, complaining the whole way but eventually figuring it out. This isn't about intelligence or competence — it's about how much change disrupts the particular skills, relationships, and routines that person has invested in. A secretary who spent 20 years mastering Lotus 1-2-3 isn't dumb when spreadsheets change; she's lost her advantage. That's real, and it matters.

Fourth: eventual integration and reframing. Given enough time, the new normal becomes

normal. The change that felt impossibly difficult is absorbed into "just how things are." This usually takes longer than organisations want it to take, but it does happen.

Fifth: collective amnesia about how hard it actually was. Within a generation or two, people often rewrite history to suggest "we were always going to move this direction" or "it was inevitable really." The fact that it was actually difficult, contested, and genuinely uncertain gets forgotten. This is surprisingly universal across generations. It's how humans cope with having survived something hard — we tell ourselves it was always going to be fine.

What This Means Now

In most organisations and educational settings, you now have four or sometimes five generations in the same room, each bringing a completely different framework for how to think about the change that's happening.

When you announce a major change — new software, new processes, new strategy — you're not making an announcement to "the team." You're making an announcement to:

- Someone from the Boomer cohort who will want to understand the logic and may need to feel consulted about what's being changed
- A Gen Xer who will nod and then quietly test whether it actually works, filtering your official narrative through hard-won skepticism
- A Millennial who will be wondering whether this is going to burn people out and whether the promised benefits will actually show up
- A Gen Zer who will assess whether it's fair, whether it's sensible, and whether you're being straight with them, and if not, they'll say so
- And possibly someone from the Silent Generation who will be watching to see whether the institution knows what it's doing, or whether you're just making stuff up

None of these reactions are wrong. They're all reasonable responses based on that person's actual historical experience.

The practical implication: there is no single message that lands the same way for everyone. Don't try to find it. Instead, acknowledge the change itself honestly. Name what's being gained and what's being lost. Be clear about what you actually know and what you're guessing at. Explain the logic. Create space for questions and concerns that take different forms. Let the Silent Generation member verify that you've thought this through. Let the Gen Xer test it quietly. Let the Millennial ask about the human cost. Let the Gen Zer challenge whether it's fair.

The change won't feel good to everyone at the same time. It probably won't feel good to anyone initially. But the respect for different frameworks and different questions will make the transition survivable — and sometimes, it will even make it better than expected.