Handling Age Gaps

Question

I'm 35, but many of the clients I need to build relationships with are 10 or 20 years older than I am, and our lives and interests seem very different. How do I build my credibility with these older executives, and how can I connect with them?

Answer

This is a common dilemma, especially during the first half of one's career. The basic relationship-building process, however, isn't all that different even when there is an age gap: You need to build rapport based on common interests and goals, understand the other person's issues, figure out how you can help, add value along multiple dimensions, and grow and develop the relationship over time. That said, if you're 35 and your client is 60, this may seem like an intimidating chasm to cross. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Early on, don't try to come across as offering a breadth of experience—focus on your specific expertise and experience and on establishing an identifiable area of credibility. Try to develop unique data and knowledge around something very specific—e.g., a deep understanding of a part of the client's organization, a competitor, or a specific issue the client's own staff haven't sufficiently dug into. This can give you instant credibility and a "platform" that allows you to be useful to a more experienced executive. Don't try to be generally smart or, worse, to "outsmart" your client. Rather, provide value around a very specific issue.
2. Communicate your willingness to invest time to get to know your client and understand him or her. Keep in mind that the younger you are, the more a client will insist on your advice deriving specifically from knowledge of her or her organization or from narrow expertise that is part of your professional credentialing (e.g., a legal statute); the older you are, the more accepting a client may be of advice and suggestions that are based on an extensive body of experience rather than deep knowledge of his particular situation. Show that you are willing to invest and learn about your client's particular situation and issues.
3. Connect around universal and personal themes. When I was 34 and one of the youngest partners in my management consulting firm (The MAC Group, which later became Gemini Consulting, now Cap Gemini Ernst & Young), I started work with a CEO who was in his late 50s. Somehow during our first meeting, I mentioned a story which revolved around calling my father for advice on a very important, personal topic. Suddenly I noticed the CEO wasn't paying much attention—he seemed to be daydreaming—and I asked him what he was thinking. "Oh," he said wistfully, "I was just reflecting on your story about consulting with your father on such an important subject. And I was thinking how nice it would be if, when I'm older, my sons would still come to me for advice and counsel." After that, we clicked right away, despite our significant age difference.
4. Ask especially good questions. This is always important, but perhaps even more so with a highly experienced, older client. Use good, even provocative questions to tap into your clients' experience, wisdom, and also biases. Ask why they've discarded certain options and pursued others, about what they've tried before, what has worked or not worked, who the major influences have been in their life, if there is anything they would do differently, and so on.
5. Understand Baby-Boomer values. Baby Boomers, for example, are highly competitive—after all, they grew up competing with 79 million others for the best schools and jobs. For Boomers, who are mostly in their forties and fifties (born 1946-1963), work is self-fulfillment. They are the "60s" generation at

work, and they still want to shake things up and fix them. They aren't so concerned with leaving a legacy (a key concern of "Traditionalists," who were born before 1946), but they do want to have standout careers. They are motivated by money, titles, recognition, and the opportunity for self-fulfillment. Making the boss look good is important, since by doing so Boomers enhance their own careers. Remember that despite all the talk about empowerment, Baby Boomers are relatively hierarchical compared to GenXers, the generation born between 1963 and 1983.

6. Be confident, but show humility. The Indian spiritual leader, Mahatma Gandhi, said, "To discover the truth one must become as humble as the dust." Show confidence in your experience and expertise, but also be humble. Ask good questions, occasionally use self-deprecating humor, and earn the right to advise your client by investing time to get to know her and her organization. Everyone likes a talented, energetic up-and-comer who is eager to excel, but everyone hates a cocky youngster who projects a sense of entitlement and feels he doesn't have to "serve his time" like everyone else!