

From the author of Trade Like a Viking™ and Stop. Think. System.

DIFFERENT BOOTS, SAME GROUND

*A Field Guide to Generational
Intelligence in the Trades*

ERIKA ENTZ



Different Boots, Same Ground

A Field Guide to Generational Intelligence in the Trades

DIFFERENT GENERATIONS. DIFFERENT STRENGTHS.
ONE INDUSTRY. STRONGER TOGETHER.

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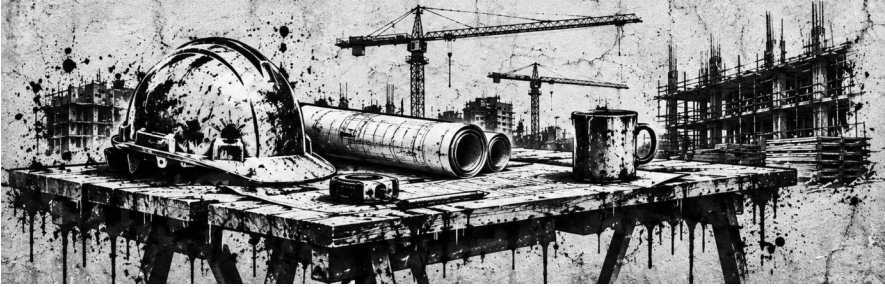
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The stories in this book are drawn from the author's experience working with trade businesses around the world. Names and identifying details have been changed, and some accounts are composites that represent real patterns. Statistics were current at the time of writing; see References and Sources.

Introduction

Why This Book Was Written



Nobody sets out to frustrate each other.

That is the first thing I want you to know.

The experienced tradie who rolls his eyes at the apprentice checking his phone. The young worker who can't understand why everything has to be done the way it has always been done. The manager stuck in the middle wondering why a simple conversation turned into a three-day cold war. The business owner who just wants everyone to get on with it.

Nobody is the villain here.

I have spent twenty years working with construction and trade businesses around the world. I have sat in offices, walked job sites, listened to owners vent, watched teams struggle, and seen the same pattern repeat itself across every country, every trade, every business size.

People are not difficult. They are just different.

And nobody ever gave them a guide to understanding those differences.

That is why I wrote this book.

Not because generations are a problem to be solved. But because the gap between them is costing the industry something it cannot afford to keep losing: good people, hard-won knowledge, fresh energy, and the kind of teams that make the work genuinely worth showing up for.

Every day in trade businesses I hear it.

“Young people today have no work ethic.”

“The old guys won’t try anything new.”

“Nobody respects experience anymore.”

“Everything is done the old way just because that’s how it’s always been done.”

I hear frustration. I hear exhaustion. I hear people who actually care about their work struggling to connect with the people standing right next to them.

What I don’t hear, not often enough anyway, is curiosity.

What if instead of judging the difference we got genuinely interested in it?

What if the apprentice on his phone and the sparky who started before mobile phones existed both had something the other one desperately needs?

What if the friction we keep calling a generational problem is actually a generational opportunity sitting there waiting to be picked up?

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT THAT OPPORTUNITY

Right now the trades industry has something no other sector has quite like this: four generations working side by side, and a fifth one on the way. Baby Boomers who built the industry. Gen X who kept it running. Millennials who are now leading it. Gen Z who are bringing energy, digital fluency, and a refreshing refusal to pretend things are fine when they aren’t. And Gen Alpha (already turning up in family businesses, apprenticeships not far away) shaped by a world none of us fully understand yet.

Different boots. All on the same ground.

That is not a problem. That is a remarkably powerful thing, if we know how to use it.

Think of fireflies. Each one carries its own light. They don’t compete. They don’t argue about whose light is brighter or whose has been shining longer. When they light up together the whole landscape changes. That is what a generationally intelligent trade business looks like. Not everyone the same. Everyone contributing. Everyone visible. Everyone’s light adding to something bigger than any one of them could create alone.

That is what this book is for.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book was written for everyone on the ground.

If you are a business owner or manager trying to build a team that actually works, not just tolerates each other but genuinely brings out the best in each other, this book is your field guide.

If you are an experienced worker who has given decades to this industry and sometimes feels like the world moved on without asking your opinion: this book sees you. Your knowledge matters more than you are currently being told.

If you are new to the trades (fresh apprentice, career changer, young person still figuring out where you fit) this book is your translator. It will help you understand the people around you and help them understand you.

If you are a Gen Z or Gen Alpha worker wondering why the job site sometimes feels like a different planet: this book will make sense of it. And it will show you what you bring that nobody else can.

If you are somewhere in the middle of all of this, a Millennial or Gen X leader trying to hold it all together, this book will remind you that you are not imagining it, and give you practical tools to navigate it.

Every generation. Every role. Every size of business. This book is for all of you.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This is a field guide, not a textbook.

You do not need to read it cover to cover in one sitting, although you absolutely can if that is how you work. You can dip into the chapters most relevant to you right now. You can hand it to a team member and say read this chapter and tell me what you think. You can leave it in the lunchroom and watch what happens.

However you use it, here is what to look for along the way:

BOOT SWAP

The same workplace situation seen through two different generational eyes. Because the same moment can feel completely different depending on which boots you are wearing.

RED FLAG / REFRAME

What it looks like when generational difference is going wrong, and how to see it differently before it costs you.

SITE STORY

Real situations from real trade businesses. The names might be changed but the circumstances will feel familiar.

DIFFERENT BOOTS MOMENT

A single thought at the end of each chapter. Not homework. Just something worth carrying with you.

GROUND RULES

The key takeaways, short and straight to the point.

ONE MORE THING BEFORE WE START

This book takes nobody's side.

It does not think older workers are resistant dinosaurs. It does not think younger workers are entitled passengers. It does not have a favourite generation, a villain generation, or a generation that needs to lift its game more than any other.

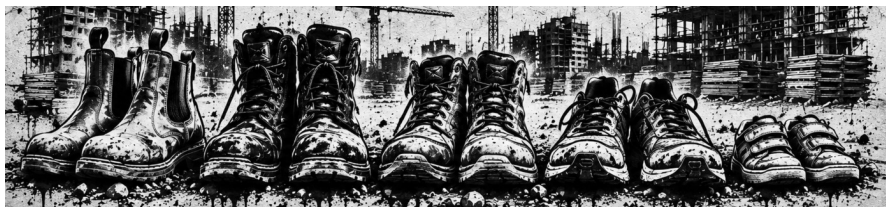
What it believes, what I genuinely believe after two decades of watching people try to work together, is that every generation brought something shaped by the world they grew up in. Every one of those somethings has value. And the businesses that figure out how to put all of those somethings together are the ones that will not just survive the next decade but absolutely thrive in it.

Different boots.
Same ground.
Let's walk it together.
Erika Entz
Rural Queensland, Australia

PART ONE

Understanding the Ground

Who's here, why it matters, and why now



CHAPTER 1

The Job Site Has Changed

Picture this.

It is seven in the morning. A concreting crew is setting up on a commercial site in the outer suburbs. There are four people on that crew.

Dave is sixty-one. He has been in the game since he was fifteen. He knows concrete the way most people know their own kitchen, by feel, by instinct, by forty-six years of mornings exactly like this one. He doesn't need to check anything. He just knows.

Glenn is forty-four. He's the leading hand. Ex-apprentice of Dave's, actually. Reliable, straight-talking, does what needs doing without a fuss. Has seen the industry change three times over and adapted every time without making a big deal of it.

Priya is thirty-one. She came into the trades as a career change after five years in project management. She asks a lot of questions, good ones, and she has already suggested two process improvements that saved the business real money. Glenn respects her. Dave is still deciding.

And then there's Jordan. Nineteen. First year apprentice. Showed up with good energy, learns fast, and has already filmed three short videos about life on site that somehow got four thousand views. He also checked his phone twice in the first ten minutes and Dave noticed both times.

Four people. One crew. One job to do.

Four completely different worlds inside their heads.

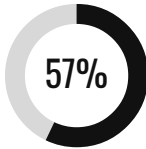
This is not an unusual crew. This is Tuesday. This is every trade business around the world right now. Four generations, sometimes five, showing up to the same site, speaking what sometimes feels like completely different languages, and somehow expected to just get on with it.

Mostly they do. Mostly it works well enough.

But well enough is leaving an enormous amount on the table.

BY THE NUMBERS

Nearly half of all advertised trades roles in Australia go unfilled: the national fill rate for Technicians and Trades Workers sits at just 57%.



of advertised trades roles in Australia are filled. The rest go unfilled.

Jobs and Skills Australia, Occupation Shortage Report, 2025

THE LANDSCAPE RIGHT NOW

The trades industry is in the middle of something it has never quite experienced before, not because work has changed, but because who is doing the work has changed more dramatically than at any other point in living memory.

Let's look at what is actually on the ground.

Baby Boomers, born roughly between 1946 and 1964, are still very much present. Many are working past traditional retirement age, either because they love the work, need the income, or simply because nobody has figured out how to replace what they know. In Australia alone, a significant portion of licensed tradespeople are over fifty-five. The same pattern holds across every English-speaking market. These are the people who built the frameworks, the standards, the culture of the industry. They are not done yet, and the industry cannot afford to pretend they are.

Gen X, born roughly between 1965 and 1980, are the quiet engine of the trades right now. They are the business owners, the site managers, the leading hands, the people holding everything together while simultaneously being squeezed from both sides. Too young to have the full authority of the Boomers, too old to be seen as the future. Often doing the heaviest lifting with the least fanfare. If you want to understand why so many trades business owners look permanently tired, start with Gen X.

Millennials, born roughly between 1981 and 1996, are now firmly in the middle of their careers. Many are managers, supervisors, business owners. They came of age during the rise of the internet, lived through the global financial crisis in their prime earning years, and entered leadership during a period of enormous technological and cultural change. They brought new thinking to the trades (around wellbeing, communication, purpose) and got a lot of criticism for it. Most of that criticism has aged poorly.

Gen Z, born roughly between 1997 and 2012, are the ones arriving now. Apprentices, new entrants, young tradespeople in their first few years. They are the most misread generation in the workforce. More on them shortly: they deserve their own chapter, and they'll get one. But for now: they are not what the stereotypes say they are. And the businesses that figure that out early are already ahead.

And then there is Gen Alpha: born from around 2013 onwards. The oldest of them are already in high school. Some are already working weekends in family trade businesses. In a few short years they will be signing apprenticeship papers. They are shaped by a world that none of the other generations grew up in: artificial intelligence as a normal part of daily life, information available instantaneously, a post-pandemic understanding of work that is still forming. They are coming. The only question is whether the industry will be ready for them.

THE NUMBERS TELL A STORY

Across every major English-speaking market the trades industry is facing the same fundamental challenge, not enough people to do the work.

In Australia, workforce modelling consistently points to significant shortfalls in key trades over the coming decade. The United Kingdom has faced chronic skilled trades shortages since Brexit reshaped its labour market. The United States has an estimated shortage of hundreds of thousands of tradespeople, a gap that widens every year as Boomers retire faster than new entrants replace them. New Zealand faces the same pressure with the added complexity of a small population and high demand from infrastructure investment.

These are not temporary blips. They are structural. And they are not going to be solved by recruitment alone.

BY THE NUMBERS

Australia needs an additional 83,000 workers in residential construction trades, a 30% boost on current levels, to meet national housing targets. Infrastructure Australia projects the total trades shortage could reach 300,000 workers by 2027.

Housing Industry Association (HIA) All Hands on Deck Report; Infrastructure Australia Market Capacity Report, 2025

BY THE NUMBERS

The UK faces over 140,000 unfilled construction vacancies and needs approximately 47,860 extra workers every year through to 2029. By 2035, more than one-third of UK construction workers will retire.

CITB Construction Workforce Outlook; PFP Thrive UK Construction Skills Shortage Report, 2025

BY THE NUMBERS

In the United States, the construction sector needs to attract 439,000 net new workers in 2025 alone to meet anticipated demand.

Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC), 2025

Here is the uncomfortable truth that does not get said often enough: the trades cannot afford to lose anyone it already has.

Not the sixty-one-year-old Dave who is thinking about slowing down but hasn't quite decided yet. Not the nineteen-year-old Jordan who is still figuring out if this is really where he belongs. Not Priya who came from outside the industry and brings a perspective nobody else on the crew has. Not Glenn who has been quietly keeping everything together for twenty years and hasn't been told clearly enough how much that matters.

Every person who walks off a job site and doesn't come back is a loss the industry can feel. Every apprentice who finishes their first year and decides it isn't worth it takes hard-won potential with them. Every experienced tradie who retires without passing on what they know takes irreplaceable knowledge into retirement.

Generational friction is not just a cultural inconvenience. It is a business risk.

WHAT HAS ACTUALLY CHANGED

It is worth being honest about something here. Older generations complaining about younger ones is not new. There are writings from ancient Rome where philosophers lamented the laziness and disrespect of the young. Every generation entering the workforce has been called soft, distracted, or uncommitted by the one before it.

So what is different now? A few things, actually.

The pace of change is different. The gap between how a Boomer learned their trade and how a Gen Z apprentice expects to learn is not just a generational preference gap: it reflects genuinely different relationships with information, technology, and authority. These are not cosmetic differences. They run deep.

The expectations around work are different. Not better or worse: different. A Boomer who found identity and purpose in decades of loyalty to a single employer is not wrong. A Gen Z worker who wants to understand the purpose behind a task before committing to it is not wrong either. Both are responding to the world that shaped them.

The diversity of the workforce is different. The trades in 2025 includes people from more backgrounds, more life experiences, and more entry pathways than at any previous point. That is genuinely new. And it is genuinely good, but it requires a new kind of fluency.

And the stakes are different. In a tight labour market, the businesses that create environments where people from every generation can contribute fully are not just nicer places to work. They are the ones that will still be operating in ten years.

THIS IS NOT ABOUT BEING NICE

Let's clear something up before we go any further.

This book is not asking anyone to be less honest. It is not suggesting that standards should drop. It is not saying that a twenty-year apprenticeship veteran should pretend that a nineteen-year-old's three months of experience is equivalent to their own.

Generational intelligence is not about lowering the bar. It is about understanding the person standing at the bar.

When Dave watches Jordan check his phone at seven in the morning, his frustration is legitimate. Standards matter. Presence matters. Professionalism matters. What generational intelligence adds to that picture is the question: why is Jordan doing that, what does he actually understand about expectations, and what is the most effective way to get the behaviour we need from him long term?

Because here is what we know. Telling Jordan to put the phone away will work for about ten minutes. Understanding why Jordan is on the phone, explaining clearly what is expected and why it matters, and giving him a reason to care: that works for ten years.

That is not softness. That is strategy.

THE FIREFLIES PRINCIPLE

There is a moment in late summer evenings in some parts of the world where the fireflies come out. Each one small, each one carrying its own light. They do not coordinate. They do not compete. They simply do what they do, and together they transform the landscape into something extraordinary.

That is the image that sits at the heart of this book.

Not every generation outshining the others. Not a competition between experience and energy, between the old way and the new way. Every generation contributing its particular light. Every person on the crew valued for what they specifically bring. The whole site, the whole business, brighter for it.

It is possible. More than possible. It is already happening in trade businesses that have figured this out, quietly and without fuss, because the people running them got curious about their teams instead of frustrated by them.

This book is the guide to doing exactly that.

THE JOB SITE HAS CHANGED. THE OPPORTUNITY IS ENORMOUS.

Dave, Glenn, Priya, and Jordan are still out there in the early morning, getting ready to pour concrete. Four sets of boots on the same ground.

Dave has knowledge that cannot be bought. Glenn has experience that cannot be rushed. Priya has perspective that cannot be manufactured. Jordan has energy and digital fluency that the business genuinely needs.

None of them can do the job as well without the others.

None of them fully know that yet.

That is about to change.

BOOT SWAP

Same moment. Two sets of boots.

Dave's boots: Jordan is on his phone again. We haven't even started and he's already distracted. When I was an apprentice you showed up ready to work. You paid attention. You earned your place. This kid has no idea what respect looks like on a job site.

Jordan's boots: I was just checking the weather forecast for the afternoon pour: I thought that was actually useful. Nobody told me I wasn't supposed to check my phone. Nobody told me much of anything actually. I don't know if I'm doing okay or not. I don't even know if Dave likes me.

Same moment. Completely different experience. Neither of them wrong. Both of them needing something the other one can't see yet.

RED FLAG / REFRAME

Red Flag: "Young people today just don't have the same work ethic."

Reframe: Work ethic looks different across generations, not because it has diminished, but because what work means has changed. Gen Z workers often show their commitment through outcomes and engagement rather than hours and silence. The question is not whether they have work ethic. The question is whether you are seeing it in the form you recognise.

SITE STORY

A plumbing business owner in regional Queensland told me about a moment that changed how he ran his team. He had been frustrated with his young apprentices for months: always on their phones, always asking why, never just getting on with it the way his older guys did.

One afternoon he asked one of them directly: “What do you actually need from me to do this job well?”

The apprentice looked surprised. Then he said: “Honestly? I just need to know if I’m doing okay. Nobody ever tells me.”

The business owner went quiet for a moment. Then he said: “Mate, I haven’t told any of them that in twenty years.”

He started doing a two-minute check-in with each person on his team every Friday. Nothing formal. Just: how are you going, what do you need, good work this week.

Staff turnover in his business dropped by more than half in the following year.

Same ground. He just started paying attention to whose boots were on it.

DIFFERENT BOOTS MOMENT

Think about the people on your team or your job site right now. How many different generations are represented? When was the last time you were genuinely curious (not frustrated, not judgemental, just curious) about what shaped one of them?

GROUND RULES

The trades industry has four generations working side by side right now, with a fifth incoming. Each was shaped by a different world. Workforce shortages mean the industry cannot afford to lose anyone it already has. Generational friction is not just a culture problem: it is a business risk. Generational intelligence is not about being soft. It is about being effective. Every generation carries something the others need. That is not a problem. That is the opportunity.

END OF SAMPLE

Ready to keep walking?

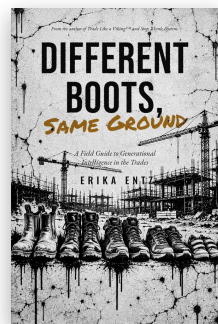
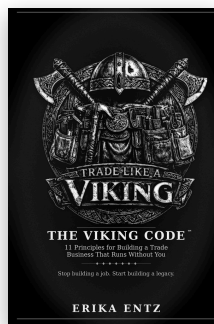
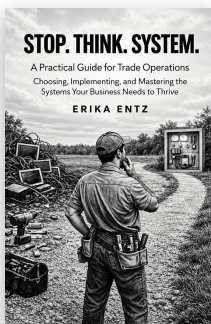
You have just read the Introduction and Chapter 1 of *Different Boots, Same Ground*.

The full book takes you through all five generations on today's job site, The Respect Code of the Trades™, and practical field guides for learning, feedback, conflict, loyalty, mentoring and keeping great people.

Available in paperback.

THE TRADE TRILOGY

Systems · Leadership · Culture



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