Leading Four Distinct Generations: The Conundrum

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For some of us, an employee with body piercings, tattoos, or multi-coloured hair, could not possibly be serious about their work, certainly not professional, and probably short-changed in the intelligence domain. If we feel that way, it may be because we come from the "old school", or belong to the humorless generation of "old fogies"; in the eyes of the body pierced and tattooed. Thus exists the conundrum of the multi-generational workplace, where, for the first time since the great influx of immigrants early in the 20th century, there is a sense of diversity unlike never before, with four distinct generations working alongside each other within one organization. For a leader, the unique challenges of generational diversity demand innovation, flexibility, tenacity and versatility. Any leader has been born into a generation that has a definitive value system, expectations and attitudes towards loyalty, commitment and engagement. Logically, there is no great mystery in relating to employees of your same generation. It is the other three generations that may cause premature graying.

This recent phenomenon is a topical issue in many executive offices; how can organizations select or develop leaders who have the capacity to effectively motivate, communicate with, engage, retain and reward such diverse groups, to maximize performance on a consistent basis? Certainly not a challenge suited for the weak of heart, but also not insurmountable for a transformational leader who is open-minded, tolerant and reasonably enlightened. The first and probably most important piece is to develop a clear understanding of the environment that shaped each of these generations, to understand and accept the variations in values, expectations and attitudes that each of these quite distinct groups bring to the workplace. A significant element of this understanding is the realization that, as a leader, you can modify expectations, re-shape attitudes, but probably not have any measurable degree of success in changing individual and generational value systems.

Various labels have been assigned to each of the generational groups, with the oldest group usually labeled **"matures", "veterans" or "traditionalists"**; those born previous to 1945. A well-developed work ethic, unbounded loyalty, a conservative approach to life, respectful of authority, strong value systems, a reluctance to embrace change, and a tendency to work until they reach compulsory retirement age, would sufficiently describe what this group brought to the workplace. As the senior citizens of the workforce, a majority also occupy leadership or ownership positions.

It gets more interesting; the **"baby boomers"**, those born between 1945 and 1965, bring a decidedly different set of personal factors to the workplace. They grew up in the 60's and 70's, where the "old values" were largely rejected and attitudes toward work and career

shifted in a major way. Authority garnered only limited and often grudging respect, commitment to self played a much larger role in how work and career were defined; expectations focused more on personal achievement, team-playing took a backseat to ambition, recognition and rewards took on a much greater degree of importance, formality was something to be scoffed at, life-work balance began to appear as a valued and sought after element of work-life, and loyalty came to be defined more in the context of one's own career, where movement between organizations increased dramatically, primarily in search of new challenges and opportunities; the gold watch of organizational longevity holds a much diminished attraction for the boomers.

Next, we throw **"Gen Xers"** into the mix; life gets increasingly challenging for leaders. Born between 1965 and 1980, they grew to adulthood during the prosperous 80's and early 90's, an era of dramatic downsizing in many organizations. Loyalty to the organization was replaced by loyalty to their superiors and their co-workers. Mundane jobs are deemed unworthy; challenging work where they can fully utilize their technical skills is what matters. Life-work balance became their mantra; overtime, 80 hour work weeks, working evenings and weekends are a somewhat distasteful option for the Xers. This generation is the most educated in history, long term affiliation with one organization is not a sought-after goal; an average of four to six jobs is more likely over the course of their working life, and they will probably retire to fully enjoy life as early as financially feasible. Work has become a means to an end; to fund a lifestyle of stress-free leisure.

Enter the **"Nexters"**,**"Gen Yers"**, or **"Millennials"** born after 1980, who began entering the workforce in the late 1990's. Sometimes described as a throwback to the traditionalists, this generation values stability, are cautiously optimistic about their future, tend to respect authority, value conformity and loyalty, place great value on their own priorities in life, see a viable place for coaching and mentoring, have a sense of blind faith in technology. As a group, they are weak in the so-called "soft skills", and tend to have a sense of entitlement that is much more pronounced than in the previous three generations. In some ways, full circle to the "traditionalists".

With this mix, the potential for volatility might appear significant. Interestingly, most organizations, rather than retreating from this seemingly daunting challenge, have instead managed to harness the positive energies of generational diversity. Proceeding from the assumption that heterogeneous groups produce greater and more positive synergies than homogeneous groups, the value of having diverse generational groups in the same workplace becomes apparent. A diversity of values, communication styles, functional conflict, innovative approaches to problem solving and creative processes, increased tolerance for the views and attitudes of others, and a greater measure of open-mindedness, can create a workplace that is measurably stronger than one that is more homogeneous. Leaders, who can get by physical appearances, different attitudes and values, and judge individuals by their contributions and strengths, will find a mother lode of talent, expertise, and knowledge that, if mined efficiently and appropriately, can produce a high-functioning organization that is a leader of productivity, quality and innovation.

Maybe the issue is only as big as we make it. After all, the "traditionalists" are a disappearing species in the workplace. The "boomers" are beginning to bail out as soon as they can retire. So, that leaves the "Xers" to prepare the "milennials" for leadership. The problem is solved? Just how do they make it happen? Oh, Oh, is that the "post-millennial" generation that we can visualize preparing to entry the work force within the next 15 years. It all started to look rather easy there for a minute, or so.

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