



STOP WITH THE "MILLENNIALS!"

Create an Intergenerational Workforce that Eliminates Ageism

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I T IS IMPORTANT THAT I EXPOSE MY BIASES AT THE beginning of this article. I believe that there is far too much emphasis on accommodating, considering, and catering to millennials in the workforce. Further, I believe that the emphasis on millennials is creating subtle (sometimes not so subtle) ageism that is tacitly accepted. Finally, I believe there needs to be more emphasis on creating a workplace that has a healthy climate that embraces the age diversity currently commonplace. Now that I have exposed my biases we can move to the substance of this article.

This article explores strategies for developing an intergenerational workforce that is guided by shared values, effective leadership, commitment, and a common desire to achieve sustainable results for the enterprise. Rather than blaming any age cohort for organizational dysfunctions or touting the superiority of another, this article introduces ways to create a healthy culture that actively advances collaboration between and among multiple generations. It is grounded in both research and the observations from sage executives.

Creating Culture Through Leadership

The creation of a healthy culture begins with the

leadership perspective. Ron Lawrence, CEO of Tennessee-based Summit View Health Management, a company that owns post-acute, independent living and mental health facilities, offered his thoughts on the root cause of intergenerational collisions. He asserted that, "If we as leaders do not set standards, enforce them consistently and expect everyone, regardless of their age cohort, to comply, the problem is with the leadership not the varied age cohorts." Lawrence contends that it is the responsibility of leadership to clearly communicate what behavior is acceptable and desired in the organization. By the same token, that communication must include dialogue with the rank and file to understand their viewpoints and better facilitate their ability to live up to the company's standards.

In fact, current research affirms that the multiple age cohorts in today's workforce have many similarities. They may have more similarities than the assumed differences. Those similarities provide insights on what is required for creating a healthy culture that welcomes all age cohorts. Mencl and Lester (2014) surveyed more than 500 Midwestern Chamber of Commerce members to identify factors that would classify an organization as a good place to work for young professionals. The

respondents included Generation Y, X, and Boomers. What they found was that the generations share more similarities than differences regarding the work factors deemed most important. The factors they considered are listed below:

- An organization that values diversity
- Teamwork in the workplace
- Flexible work arrangements
- Getting immediate feedback and recognition from my supervisor
- Work-life balance
- Having a job that challenges me
- A company that provides continual training and development opportunities
- That I am involved in decision-making processes that affect my work
- Being financially rewarded for the work I do
- Career advancement opportunities within the company

Of the factors examined, the value differences found were in career advancement opportunities, diversity climate, and immediate recognition and feedback. It should be noted that differences were not the large chasms popular myths would have us believe; in fact, they were slight.

Let's explore those differences. Gen Y places more value on career advancement opportunities than the other two groups. Is this not logical? They are at the beginning of their careers and naturally want to get ahead. Moving to the diversity climate, again Gen Y places greater value on diversity in the workplace. It is surmised that this is because this generation grew up after the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Civil Rights Movement and the legalization of gay marriage. They came of age when there was an increased number of ethnicities in the workplace and many other legal and social interventions that created environments where diversity became normative. Gen Y also place a higher premium on immediate recognition and feedback. This may be linked to the fact the Gen Y have come of age during a time of technological advancement, giving them immediate access to information and instant communication.

Other researchers have determined that there is insufficient empirical evidence of the purported chasm between generations (Macky, Gardner & Forsyth, 2008; Meriac, Woehr & Banister, 2010). While there is rampant conjecture about generational collisions in the workplace, much of it is just that: guesswork, personal assertions, and popular propositions advanced by consultants and aspiring thought leaders. This is not to say that leadership patterns are not changing. A

different approach to leadership is emerging as younger employees are tasked with managing colleagues several years their senior (Haeger & Lingham, 2013). Conflicts regarding these different approaches can emerge because of misunderstandings and different paradigms of leadership that are neither clearly stated nor explored. Equally as important, leaders and direct reports are well-served by sharing their perceptions of what effective leadership looks and feels like.

According to Christine Phelps, deputy executive director of Minneapolis-based American Academy of Neurology Institute, lumping people into generational cohorts simply does not work; however, she acknowledges that stereotypes are becoming more ingrained. She states that it is important to fight any system that would have us believe that there are all of these differences in generations. Phelps adds, "My responsibility as an executive is to help all employees by creating a truly inclusive, collaborative environment." She holds that there is an organizational responsibility to challenge values and surface ageist beliefs.

The danger of accepting the rampant assertions and assumptions about age cohorts is that they promote ageism. They also have the potential to color our thinking in workplace interactions. Wendy Green, managing vice president of the Washington, D.C.-based trade association Leading Age offered her experiences. "When I hear people talk about millennials and I go into a meeting with someone from that category I find myself having to dispel the stereotypes that are associated with that generational group. A focus on generations promotes stereotypes. It increases ageism." Green goes on to say that in addition to promoting stereotypes, focus on age cohorts leads to bad decisions being made. Harboring and promoting stereotypes leads to intergroup bias and can promote discriminatory behavior in organizations (Iweins, Desmette, Yzerbyt, & Stinglhamber, 2013).

It is important that ageism be clearly understood. Misconceptions would have us believe that ageism only applies to the elderly. In fact, it is a multidimensional term that encompasses factors like different perceptions, actions, attitudes, prejudices, and behaviors demonstrated towards an individual based on their age (Yilmaz, Kisa & Zeynelolu, 2012). Clearly, an overemphasis on age cohorts and putting employees in categories based on those cohorts demonstrates ageism, though it may be unconscious or unintentional. In either case, the result is the same: instead of building bridges of mutual respect and understanding, organizations are creating divisiveness.

Combatting Covert Ageism

Combatting ageism begins with a simple step, admitting that it exists. This means that leaders must look at the

ways in which they are promoting ageist behaviors. That behavior may be evident in over-emphasizing the needs of millennials. It may be evident in advancing attitudes that reflect differing expectations of performance based on age. It may also be evident in language perpetuated in the organization. Once leaders identify opportunities for creating intergenerational collaboration, they can begin the process.

Frances Sequeira, vice president of talent management at Yonkers-based Elizabeth Seton Pediatric Center, holds that leaders are responsible for establishing standards and rules. She, like Lawrence, contends that leaders have a serious responsibility for creating a work environment where everyone can thrive. Sequeira's position is that there needs to be intentional thought about how organizations are engaging all employees. She believes that teamwork, with clear goals and objectives that are consistently communicated by managers, is key to blending generations. This takes us back to the second factor identified as important in creating a great place to work, teamwork. It appears from the research cited earlier in this article, that all age cohorts want the opportunity to work collaboratively.

Phelps suggests combatting ageist beliefs by creating organizational learning so that people are treated as individuals. Research suggests a model called the TEAM approach that is designed to build intergenerational bridges (Gibson et al., 2010). TEAM stands for Team Composition, which must be diverse; Education and Training for the entire organization; Awareness/Accountability/Accommodation; Mentoring. This model offers a thoughtful approach to enhancing intergenerational understanding and appreciation. This type of approach is aligned with Phelps' thought that leaders must fight against ageist behavior and use education as a tool for enhancing the workplace. Note that having a company that provides continual education and opportunities was cited as a factor that enhances the workplace for all age cohorts.

Efforts to combat ageism should be linked to the organization's strategic intent. Undoubtedly, most future-focused enterprises have an element of their strategy that addresses human capital utilization. There needs to be a clear, strategic focus on intergenerational understanding and appreciation. This should be explicitly stated so that it becomes a commonly understood value throughout the enterprise.

Summary

In order to create a healthy work environment the emphasis has to shift from separating people into generational cohorts to identifying practices that create a healthy culture for all employees. Perhaps Phelps put it best when she said "Intergenerational

appreciation and understanding has to be built into the muscle of the organization. We have to challenge the notion that there are all of these differences between generations."

While it may have become both comfortable and popular to cater to a generation, the reality is that today's workplace covers the lifespan. The factors presented at the beginning of this article can be developed so that intergenerational collaboration, cooperation and respect become the norm. The emerging research cited in this article, along with the guidance offered by executives from multiple industries and geographic locations, illustrate how important it is for us to confront accepted stereotypes and generalizations based on generations.

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