With all the books and courses on generations, I still continue to hear people complain about this or that generation. As George Orwell said, “Each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one before it and wiser than the one that comes after it.” It’s humorous and true, and I get concerned when I hear generalizations like, “Kids today are disrespectful” or “Older people are out of it.”

When I think of workplace competencies, it seems like even a modicum of literacy about generations would go a long way; lack of it continues to lead to massive misinterpretations, lost opportunities, and most importantly, diminished trust and community in the workplace and beyond. The stakes become higher when I consider schools and how much these ongoing misinterpretations and assumptions about each other get in the way of learning for adults and students.

In *Retiring the Generation Gap* (2006), Jennifer Deal demonstrates that all generations have pretty much the same values. She makes the distinction between values and behavior. We see someone’s behavior that is markedly different from our own and mistakenly assume that our values are different rather than realizing those same values manifest in different behavior from generation to generation.

If we start by focusing on similarities, respecting differences and interpreting behavior through each generation’s lens, there’s hope to arrive at common ground and move to solutions. The question becomes, how can I embrace my generation and build bridges with the others?

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In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott (susan@fierceinc.com) explores aspects of communication that encourage meaningful collaboration. Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success At Work & In Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Penguin, 2002) and *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst “Best” Practices of Business Today* (Broadway Business, 2009), leads Fierce Inc. (www.fierceinc.com), which helps companies around the world transform the conversations that are central to their success. Fierce in the Schools carries this work into schools and higher education. Columns are available at www.learningforward.org. © Copyright, Fierce Inc., 2011.
leaders. Managers frequently have difficulty motivating employees of different ages and at different stages of their careers. Yet, understanding what each generation thinks, values, and desires is critical for a more collaborative and successful work environment.

Each generation thinks it’s better than others. Why is that? If our values are similar but we express them in very different ways, opportunities for misunderstandings are rife. And think about the impact of the generational mix in schools. How wonderful it is when old guard and new blood work side by side and leverage their differences to benefit students.

**GOING FORWARD**

Given generational differences in behavior, what can we do, instead of making assumptions and letting misunderstandings proliferate?

Consider the impact of motivating people from their perspective (rather than our own) and moving beyond a culture of us vs. them to create an atmosphere of inclusion, to leverage and appreciate the very diversity that’s right under our noses. Deal talks about how each generation is looking for clout, either holding on to clout or gaining clout they don’t yet have. What if we work together to increase our collective clout in service to a common goal?

Consider this question, in your team, your school, your organization: Who owns the truth? Imagine your team, your school, or your organization as a giant beach ball. You’re all standing on a gigantic beach ball. You are standing on the blue stripe. The ball is so huge that from your vantage point, all you can see is blue, nothing but your stripe. You could assume the entire world is blue. And you know better.

You know that somewhere out there is a yellow stripe, a red stripe, a green stripe, maybe even a stripe with a color you’ve never seen. The ball is a combination of all its stripes, not just yours. Real collaboration starts with recognizing that everyone owns a piece of the truth— one stripe on the beach ball — and that no one owns the entire truth. No one can see everything, be everywhere.

Given this, your work is to interrogate the multiple competing realities that exist in your organization, to actively seek out different perspectives and ask, “What do you see that I’m not seeing?” And really ask. That doesn’t mean you always agree with the other person. You may say, “I don’t see it that way, and I want to understand your thinking.” That simple statement goes a long way in creating a relationship where someone feels heard and understood versus misinterpreted.

So instead of jumping to judgment when you’re about to interpret someone’s behavior, get curious. Actively solicit different perspectives, competing views of reality and honor them, even if you don’t agree.

If you practice interrogating reality and do so sincerely and without laying blame, people will start speaking with you, telling you what’s on their minds. And you’ll get to the truth of matters — the ground truth on what people really think and feel.

The outcomes are profound when you interrogate reality rather than move forward based on unexplored assumptions. You gain a better understanding of each generation, a better work community, increased productivity, satisfaction, and job enjoyment as well as increased enthusiasm and buy-in for achieving outcomes. You develop yourself and people across generations. You become the kind of person to whom people will speak the truth. And we need to build on the truth in order to make progress and move forward, not just for ourselves, for the common good. As Alan Autry said, “Leadership requires the courage to make decisions that will benefit the next generation.”

**REFERENCES**


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