



If we open our minds, we can close the generation gap in the workplace

I often write to music. The musical backdrop to Fierce Leadership (2009) was often Trio Mediaeval, who sing traditional ballads, hymns, and lullabies from Norway. I also spent days writing to the sounds of Pete’s Pond at the Mashatu Game Reserve in Botswana. For me, amassing a diverse collection of thoughts, ideas, emotions, and worldviews through the words, songs, and actions of others helps me be awake, engaged, and connected. The greatest insights often come from people who are different — older, younger, from other cultures, other lifestyles — than me. And to learn from them, I must be willing to consider that what might be true for others might be true, or at least useful, for me as well.

Seeking out people with different views and perspectives is often challenging because it requires us to set aside judgment and open our minds. But we have to remind ourselves that to get beyond where we are, we would all be well served to stop talking and listen to one another. Connection, engagement, inclusion — achieving these is a worthy goal that will remain just that unless we create deep connections in this moment, with the person across the table in the meeting, the one with whom we disagree, the one we haven’t valued, or haven’t really seen, until now.

— Susan Scott

By Deli Moussavi-Bock

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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GENERATIONAL MIX AT WORK

Working effectively with a multigenerational workforce is one of the greatest challenges facing today’s

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.

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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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Scott, S. (2009). *Fierce leadership: A bold alternative to the worst "best" practices of business today.* New York: Crown Business.

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Interrogating reality with a group

When you have decisions to make, problems to solve, strategies to design, invite people from all generations, including students, to your meetings. Get creative. Whose perspective would be useful to understand?

- Act in a way that is consistent with your objective of honesty. In other words, model it yourself. Say things, confess things that scare you.
- Set a tone and an atmosphere in which competing ideas, opinions, and styles are not just encouraged, but expected.
- Engage people intellectually *and* emotionally. "What do you feel?"
- Ask people for specifics regarding context as well as content. "Please say more about that."
- Involve attendees in two-way discussions rather than coming across as a "presenter" who is merely a talking head.
- Moderate interactions to avoid inappropriate comments, nonconstructive criticism, and grandstanding. Blunt honesty is useful; offensive comments are not.
- Make needed adjustments in pacing and participation to ensure that you involve and hear from everyone present.

Source: Scott, 2009.