Uncovering the expectations that drive intergenerational group relations in organizations: an exercise for bridging the gap

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ABSTRACT

Generational boundaries are acknowledged as a key aspect of effectively managing diversity in contemporary organizations. Understanding important aspects of the shared histories, experiences, and characteristics of each generation can aid in fostering connections across birth cohorts. This exercise complements such approaches by utilizing a framework for engaging participants in the underlying structural dynamics at play between and among generational groups. Participants uncover core attitudes and perceptions that shape their interactions, allowing them to engage across generational boundaries with more intention.

Keywords: diversity, group dynamics, conflict, experiential learning, generations, organizational culture

INTRODUCTION

Working across generations can invoke warm images of an older, more seasoned and accomplished professional patiently offering guidance to a younger, eager employee. Much of the research on mentoring has this as its foundation, with benefits for both the mentor and protégé (see Kammeyer-Mueller and Judge, 2008; Eby et al, 2008 for reviews). In addition, sponsorship, a more focused approach to mentoring that places emphasis on advocating for the protégé, is now recognized – and desired – as the key to effectively positioning employees for success (Hewlett et al, 2009). Some researchers suggest that organizational cultures rely upon knowledge and competence being passed to succeeding generations (Gephart et al, 1996). Given this notion, opportunities to explore the nature, nuances and complexities of relationships across generations are needed in order to facilitate increased understanding and cooperation in the workplace.

GENERATION AS A SOCIAL CATEGORY

According to the Pew Center (2019), the mix of generations in contemporary organizations is noteworthy, with members representing six cohorts: the Greatest Generation (1900-1927); Silent Generation (1928-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), Generation Y (millennials, 1981-1996) and Generation Z (1997-2012). Researchers have also identified Zillennials, a micro-generation between Y and Z that embodies a sense of being on the cusp (Ward, 2023) and Xennials, those between Gen X and Millennials (Kempf Taylor, 2023).

Members of these generational groups share values and belief systems by virtue of having experienced important cultural, social, and historical events, especially as each group came of age. Considerable attention is given to their attitudes, preferences, and impact on buying power, political power, parenting styles, the adoption and use of technology, and employment (CGK, 2024).

Within organizational settings, interactions between younger and older employees may be fraught with challenges, as has been noted by academics, journalists, authors, and observers of organizational life. Older employees may be seen as out-of-touch, outdated, and "on the other side of" their careers, while younger employees may be viewed as capricious, smart but not wise, and impatient. Such attitudes can cause tension and conflict in working environments, making it difficult to foster the cohesion and unity needed to effectively work together as a team. In addition, the relationship between age and position are not so neatly correlated. Young employees are often managing older employees, which does not preclude, but does complicate, prevailing notions – or wishes for – an environment in which seasoned professionals pass along sage guidance to the next generation of leaders. Weiss and Zhang (2020) note the distinction between age groups and generations, arguing that age cohorts share experiences, events and memories that over time evolve into generational groupings. "Over time, cohorts accumulate shared experiences and interpretations of historical and cultural events, which transforms them into generations." (Weiss and Zhang, 2020, p. 409) These generational groups represent a "…a social category that is embedded in social and historical processes…" and that is linked to age, one of the most salient social categories associated with work on diversity (Brewer, 1988). Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) efforts carry with them an expectation that managers be as

adept at working across generations, though research findings suggest persistent challenges exist, even across countries (Weiss and Zhang, 2020).

Managing across generations has been a topic in the family business literature (e.g. Parada et al, 2020; Sreih et al, 2019; Hanson et al, 2019) where continuity is a key objective and in public health (Verhage et al, 2021) where young people's view of older people is influenced by interaction with their grandparents, other elders and the media. A focus on generational group memberships as a key diversity attribute highlights the cultural, historical, and social influences that shape perspectives while minimizing the biological realities of age. Varying perspectives may be viewed as equivalent without the tendency to rank or assign status, i.e. the generations are different from one another, not better or worse than one another. Generations each bring their values to the workplace, which can call for fundamental changes in organizational culture (Eversole et al, 2012). Understanding the traits of each generation (Beekman, 2011) can lead to effective strategies for managing the subgroups. Hewlett et al (2009), for example, suggest that Millennials closely resemble Baby Boomers in that both share an interest in flexible work arrangements as well as an organizational environment that supports social change. Smola and Sutton (2002) have also noted that finding a balance between work and personal life is important across generations. They also suggest that work values change as employees age. Yang and Guy (2006) do not find significant differences in what motivates Gen X and Baby Boomers. These research findings have implications for managers in terms of attitudes, communication, respect, training, turnover, engagement, and retention (Tolbize, 2008).

STRUCTURAL DYNAMICS ACROSS GENERATIONS

While understanding the shared histories, perspectives and characteristics of each generation is important, this exercise explores the ways in which the positioning of generational groups influences dynamics and perceptions. Oshry's (2007) seminal work taught us that there is a structural component to interactions – that we more fully comprehend behaviors and attitudes when we understand that underlying logic and its powerful impact on the way people relate to one another. Unlike race and gender, generational groupings embody time. We are thinking not just about who is different from us, but who came before us and who is coming behind us. For generations before us, how do we tend to view/see the older generation? As we relate to them, what expectations do we carry with us – both about what we want from the relationship and what they might want from us? Similarly, when interacting with younger generations, what do we expect from them, and what do we imagine they expect from us? If we position ourselves as between two generations, we can consider how our position influences our views of each generation. These expectations and beliefs shape the subtext of our conversations across generational group memberships. Even as we acknowledge their varied histories, perspectives and views of each generation, there are enduring sets of expectations attached to the underlying structure of age-related birth cohorts. Those exist in societal relationships and also influence our interactions within the work context.

Returning to the "wish" that younger employees may have for an older person to act as a mentor and guide, the structural dynamics may influence the expectations each group has of one another. For example, younger employees may think that older people have knowledge but no longer have the drive or motivation needed to succeed, particularly if they have already accomplished many of their career goals. By contrast, older employees may view younger

people as motivated and "hungry" but too inexperienced to be taken "seriously." These attitudes are the scaffolding upon which any number of viewpoints, perspectives, feelings are built. A compelling question, for example, as a younger employee interacts with an older employee, is "Do I see this person as someone who I can learn from? Do they have something to teach me?" Conversely, a compelling question that an older employee might have of a younger employee is "Can I pass the baton to this person? Will they be prepared to fill my shoes?" People from different generations may not have or take the opportunity to express those sentiments directly, especially if there is an affective component attached to the manner in which the question is posed or received. These thoughts can elicit a range of emotions, as well as hopes, dreams, and remembrances of expectations from parents or loved ones, that seem ill-suited for a discussion in a business context. Yet, they may be exactly the kinds of conversations that help people connect across generations. If uncovered and examined, they may provide an opportunity for shaping viewpoints and feelings in new ways.

PURPOSE OF THIS EXERCISE

This exercise engages participants in a dialogue about the perspectives of multiple generational groups. It is an opportunity to consider how those views reflect the priorities of the particular generation while situating the participant at the center of the generational set of relationships. The facilitator may want to conduct this exercise in the early stages of a group's time together. In doing so, the exercise gives group members an opportunity to approximate and examine intergroup generational dynamics before addressing its own intragroup generational dynamics.

DESIGN

Part I: Prework
Before the session, send the participants a set of questions with instructions to:
- Answer the questions.
- Interview someone at least 20 years older.
- Interview someone at least 20 years younger.

As an option, provide a pre-reading that outlines the generations currently in the workforce, and the characteristics of each. This is not essential, though, since participants are focused on the responses of people they know, and will have less tendency to be swayed by the pre-reading as lens for understanding their interviewees' responses.
Questions can be open or closed-ended but should be generative and sufficiently complex as to reduce the tendency to give short, simplified answers. Examples of questions are included in Appendix A.

Part II: Introduction and Individual Report Out (40 minutes)

During the session, introduce the exercise to the participants, noting that generational differences are receiving a substantial amount of attention in contemporary organizations. This exercise will give the participants an opportunity to discuss topics for which there may be

varying viewpoints according to generation and to discuss the implications for facilitating constructive interactions between and among organizational members.

Ask each participant report out on their responses and those of their interviewees. As participants report out, capture key phrases, with a column for "Participants," "20+ Years Older," and "20+ Years Younger."

Part III: Themes (30 minutes)

In plenary, ask the participants to review and consider the key phrases from their own responses and those of each interviewee. Encourage discussion about each of the following questions:

- What is interesting or notable about how participants responded?
- What is notable about how those 20+ years older responded?
- What is notable about how those 20+ years younger responded?
- What are key similarities among the generations?
- What are key differences among the generations?

Discuss the extent to which hearing the varied responses enables participants to better understand the other groups. Ask participants to then consider how they view the other generations.

- How do these insights influence how you view the older or younger generation?

Review the common perceptions that generations have of one another (see Appendix B) and discuss the extent to which this resonates with the group. For example, people before us are often seen variously as out-of-touch (not relevant) or as wise (experienced). People behind us are often seen variously as naïve and impulsive or innovative and leading-edge.

Discuss the implications that this discussion has for leading a workplace that includes more than one of the generational groups. Ask the group to consider what one generation may expect of another (see Appendix C):

- How would you manage the other person/group? Participants often will give examples of suggestions or recommendations they would have for the other person (which will likely amplify the differences between the generational groups).
- How would you manage your perception of the other person/group? This encourages participants to discuss how they might adjust their own attitudes and perceptions in order to address the expectations that other generations have of them (which may uncover ways to connect with the generational group).

End the discussion with an emphasis on the importance of finding ways to connect, not distinguish from, the other generations. Emphasize that while the distinctions are important, the connections hold promise for being able to work cooperatively in an organizational environment.

Part IV: Debriefing (20 minutes)

Give participants an opportunity to pause and reflect upon the exercise:

- What did you learn about yourself during this exercise?
- If participants represent multiple generations, discuss how the insights are similar and different.
- Encourage participants to consider how the exercise might change how their intragroup interactions across generations.
- Give participants an opportunity to present "mini-case" situations from their organizations to consider how the insights gained from the exercise might ease tension and conflict.
- The exercise homogenizes the group, i.e. places all participants in the "middle" generation. Encourage participants to consider their actual generational group membership and how the exercise may influence their interactions with one another.

Part V: Feedback (10 minutes)

The session concludes with an opportunity for participants to provide feedback. Questions for consideration include:

- Did this experience help you think about new ways to interact across generations?
- What, if anything, was easy to say or do?
- What, if anything, was hard to say or do?

Participants may also have suggestions for alternative questions and formats that would further enhance the exercise. For example, the participants may want to incorporate a second diversity characteristic (e.g. race, gender) into the exercise, or they may want to form generational subgroups before doing individual report outs. These alternatives might fit for groups that have a level of comfort with each other and/or have been active for some time.

SUMMARY

Generational differences can be the source of conflict and frustration in organizations. While considerable effort is placed on understanding the views, preferences, shared histories and experiences of each generational grouping, this exercise attends to the dynamics among and between the generations. It is suggested that generations occupy structural positions in relation to each other that profoundly shape thoughts and feelings. A central theme emerges around the degree to which each generation perceives that it can learn from another. Because knowledge and experience sharing are essential to the development, personally and professionally, of organizational members, views about who one can learn from form an undercurrent that shapes attitudes and behaviors when interacting across generations. It is suggested that organizational members address these undercurrents in order to facilitate cooperation across generations.

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APPENDIX A

Below are examples of questions for conducting the cross-generational interviews. Questions that are generative and invite discussion, as well as those that ask the respondent to adopt and defend a position, are often helpful in order to provide sufficient information to examine the key values, beliefs and attitudes that may be shaped in part by generational influences. The "why" behind an adopted position is as important to understand as the position itself.

- What is an important, timeless leadership skill that every effective manager has?
- Which is more important – leading people or leading processes?
- What motivates people?
- If left unsupervised, what would people do?
- Is the customer always right?
- Does effective marketing uncover needs or create needs?
- Is perception reality?
- Are ethics shaped by the leaders or followers in a company?
- What is an indisputable value held by people and companies around the world?
- Should companies be liable for ethical failures?
- Is technology running our lives, or are we?
- What is an organizational process that no technology can ever replace?
- Do companies have to grow in order to remain viable?
- Which comes first – strategy or structure?
- Do companies have an obligation to support the personal aspirations – and help with the personal challenges – of employees?
- Is being present synonymous with being productive?
- Is the era of working for a single company for 30+ years gone?
- Describe the ideal employee.
- Should a company's primary responsibility be to its shareholders?
- Absolute (i.e. 100%) compliance with company policies and procedures – is that an attainable goal?

APPENDIX B

The facilitator may capture key attributions made about each generation so that participants can consider the extent to which the responses from the cross-generational interviews lead them to view those generations in particular or specific ways.

Youngest generation   impulsive, naïve < > energetic, innovative

Middle generation   capable, earnest < > lost

Older generation   wise, accomplished < > irrelevant, slow

APPENDIX C

The underlying structure of relations among generations (someone is before me; someone is behind me) has at its core a set of expectations that shape the interaction. Attending to this core set of expectations may help build connections between and among generational groups.

Younger generation to older generation:
Is this a person I can learn from?
Is this person a role model?
Can this person introduce me to (or provide me with) new opportunities and experiences?
Can this person help me navigate the career journey?
Can I trust the guidance this person gives me?

Older generation to younger generation:
Is this person willing to learn from me?
Is this person coachable?
Can I pass the baton to this person?
Can this person step into my shoes?
Can I have confidence in this person's ability to step forward?