Bridging the Generational Divide

5 Strategies for Harnessing Team Capacity

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"Every generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it." This observation, attributed to George Orwell offers a multitude of insights into one of today's most pressing organizational challenges. Namely, to get employees from multiple generations to work together toward a shared goal. On one level, it reminds us that the gaps we see in the generational divide are not unique to one generational group nor are they new. In fact, these generational perceptions have been traced all the way back to ancient Greece when Aristotle said, "The young people would always rather do noble deeds than useful ones. Their lives are regulated more by moral feeling than by reasoning."

Orwell's observation also offers a context for tackling one of the biggest obstacles to bridging the generational divide and ultimately, to harnessing the collective talent and capacity of today's multi-generational workforce.

The typical picture that is painted of today's millennial generation (Gen Y) is that of an arrogant, self-absorbed and entitled group who resent authority and who have an unquenchable thirst for feedback and praise. We're also led to believe broad generalizations such as millennials are tech wizards and baby boomers are tech dinosaurs. The fact remains that this skill spectrum knows no generational boundaries.

What we can learn from Orwell's observation and Aristotle's insight is that these less-than-flattering descriptors can actually be associated with nearly every generation over the course of human history. Unfortunately, we have been sold the idea of this generational divide through countless articles and stories that exacerbate the perceived differences between generational groups by casting them in a negative light.

When left unchallenged, the perceived differences take root and devolve to a point where stereotyping is allowed to flourish. The resulting biases not only impede teamwork and collaboration but also further widen the generational divide. To be sure, today's do more with less; intensely competitive work environment mandates teamwork and collaboration at the highest level.

Although differences do exist among the various generational groups, there is a growing body of research that paints a picture of deeply rooted similarities. Chief among them is what each group wants from their employer. What millennials want from their employer is strikingly similar to that of the GenXers and baby boomers; challenging and meaningful work, fairness, opportunities to learn and advance and competitive compensation. Additionally, all three generational groups share a parallel view that an effective leader is a person who leads by example, acts with integrity, creates linkage between role and organizational goals and brings out the best in employees.

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With very few exceptions, the topic of generational differences in today's workplace is on the minds of leaders and teams in nearly every industry or sector. While as many as four generations working together toward a common goal has its challenges, it also represents an unparalleled opportunity for organizations that can harness this diversity to increase team collaboration and impact.

To effectively harness, engage and motivate today's multi-generational workforce, successful organizations must strive to create a culture of mutual understanding, respect and appreciation. To be sure, the differences among each generational group will remain constant just as they have for centuries. By shifting the focus from differences to common ground, talents and shared purpose, you not only enhance collaboration but also take the first step in bridging the generational divide.

5 Things You Can Do Now
to Bridge the Generational Divide

1. Invest the time to assess the cultural norms of your organization as they relate to generational stereotyping. A simple but impactful process would involve asking a random, cross section of your team or organization to generate a list of descriptors for each generational group. Adding an anonymous context to this process will likely produce a very telling picture of the scope of the generational divide among your employees.

2. Initiate a conversation with your leadership peer group about their view of the generational divide and challenge them to explore leadership behaviors that widen the divide as well as those that serve to bridge the divide. Also define a set of leadership behaviors that can be incorporated into a leadership strategy for helping others to appreciate generational differences and talents.

3. Solicit input from your HR partners to help refine your leadership strategy and engage them as co-pilots in helping to build a culture of mutual understanding, respect and appreciation.

4. Seek feedback from your team about their impression of the generational divide and ask them to consider what role they play in widening the divide and bridging the divide. Also encourage them to define the specific talents and attributes that each generational group brings to the team and how these contribute to organizational success.

5. Link each person's role, talents and contribution to the key goals of the organization. The more employees understand how their talents and the talents of their colleagues impact team success, the more likely they will cast generational differences in a positive light.

About David A. O'Brien

David is President of CT based WorkChoice Solutions, a trusted provider of leadership and team effectiveness training, coaching and consulting services that was founded in 2000. He works with a wide range of corporate, non-profit and public sector clients to help bring about sustainable improvements in organizational effectiveness. His first book, *The Navigator's Handbook, 101 Leadership Lessons for Work & Life* is available on-line and in bookstores nationwide. His second book, *The Navigator's Compass, 101 Steps Toward Leadership Excellence* was released in 2015 and is also available nationwide. To learn more about the scope of David's work in helping leaders and teams to be more effective or to arrange for David to speak at your next conference or other special event, please visit WorkChoice Solutions on line at: **www.workchoicesolutions.com** or call him directly at 860.242.1070.