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The Generational Mirage?

A pilot study into the perceptions of leadership by Generation X and Y

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Excelerator: *New Zealand Leadership Institute* is a national research and development initiative to enhance the understanding of leadership in New Zealand and take action to ensure the country has creative and talented leaders and outstanding leadership. The Institute is based at The University of Auckland Business School.

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“We need to lead people from these age groups as we should lead everyone”

For leaders trying to understand what makes our younger colleagues and reports "tick", there are two social psychological traps to avoid. First, as we try to understand the nature of generational differences we often fall prey to our natural tendency to stereotype, and this can make us perceive differences as greater than they in fact are. Second, we tend to see the differences in attitude or action that do exist as reflecting personality traits that prevail in each generation rather than reactions to age-linked differences in situation. The end result is that we accept the characterizations of "Generation X" or "Generation Y" offered by the popular press.

This paper does a wonderful job of bringing some reality testing to the discussion of generational differences. By engaging focus groups from different generations in discussions of work and leadership, the authors have found a way to portray the attitudes and values of each group, and they have done so by illustrating differences and similarities in their respondents' own words. The paper shows that we need to lead people from these age groups as we should lead everyone: by listening, building sound relationships, and looking at things from the perspective of those we lead.

E. Allan Lind, Thomas A. Finch Professor of Business Administration in Management, Co-director of the Duke Center on Leadership and Ethics, Fuqua School of Business, Duke University, USA

“Wise leaders do not rely on conventional wisdom”

In the same way that generalisations about different national cultural groups can do more harm than good when trying to build authentic business relationships, so too the generational stereotypes that have gained widespread currency in the business world can divert and undermine our efforts to lead.

Good leaders recognise and are comfortable with the paradox that we're all humans and yet every one is unique. They are not looking for quick and easy ways to categorise people and put them in boxes. Wise leaders do not rely on conventional wisdom, hearsay or pop psychology to guide their thinking. They are constantly looking out to challenge, not affirm those seductive stereotypes that subliminally shape and cloud our thinking.

As we can see from this study, followers, both 'Generations X' and 'Y', do want to learn from their leaders. What and how they learn might not be what leaders from the other generations might normally consider. By the same token, smart leaders also find ways to genuinely learn from their followers. There's no substitute, as this study shows, in simply talking and engaging with followers from all generations and keeping an open mind.

Dr Brad Jackson, Director Centre for the Study of Leadership, Victoria University of Wellington, NZ

“Treat people as consultants, not as employees”

From our existing pool of leadership competencies, we can see that individualised consideration becomes even more important in this emerging era.

It seems clear that individual performance is favoured over organisational performance, as desired outcomes for Gen X and Gen Y followers. The message for managers is to give them incentives that will help them to achieve as individuals; and that will also help the organisation. These people will not sacrifice self for organisation. Get to know what your followers want and expect. They will not just provide what you want and expect.

It is not their age that makes them Gen X or Gen Y; it is their attitudes that make them Gen X or Gen Y. Treat people as consultants, and not as employees. A manager's ability to make sense of the big picture and the pace of change is more important than ever. Enhance the ability of these people to adapt to the pace and scale of change and you will have followers. Leadership must be earned. It can never be taken for granted.

Professor Ken Parry, Griffith Business School, Griffith University, QLD, Australia

Foreword

Leadership is a very personal concept to us all. We all know what leadership means to ourselves. But what leadership means to our peers and employees is a very engaging and pertinent question, particularly in the context of our current talent shortage.

The continuing challenge that faces employers today, and into the future, is the changing nature of leadership within our own organisations, and the broader business community.

When tackling this pressing issue it is tempting, and indeed fashionable, to segment the working population by generation, attributing each with distinct attitudes and behaviours. The impulse to react to such pop-psychology can be strong. But building human capital strategies on generalisations can be foolhardy at best, dangerous at worst.

That is why for the latest paper in the Hudson 20:20 Series we commissioned *Excelerator: New Zealand Leadership Institute* at the University of Auckland Business School, to investigate the very foundations of this much-vaunted generational divide.

The findings of the research I believe, are at once interesting and instructive for both industry experts and casual observers alike. What lessons, if any, such a perspective has to offer are explored along the way, and presented here for your perusal.

I trust you will value these insights.



Anne Hatton
President & CEO
Hudson Australia/New Zealand

1: Introduction

As Australia and New Zealand head towards a challenging demographic trough in the next five to seven years, the war for talent will become more intense. The initial impact is already making itself known in some skill and geographical areas with acute shortages in the supply of people and specific skills.

Popular writers in the media believe that Generation X (born 1965 to 1977) and Generation Y (born 1978 to 1994) have distinct generational characteristics that will affect how this war for talent is waged, and who will win.

One thing that we do know is that the calibre of leadership in competing organisations and the way they value new and existing employees will play a substantial role in attracting or discouraging these workers regardless of their generational labels.

But what is leadership? Whilst many of us have experienced the dramatic increase in collective capacity that takes place when we are part of a great leadership team, that leadership effect remains a complex phenomenon to pin down. Despite lacking real boundaries or even a clear definition,¹ it is powerful, liberating and a catalyst for new dimensions of performance. Leadership is not, however, so deeply mysterious that it cannot be understood or further developed in our people. Some will develop a greater depth of understanding about leadership faster than others. Some will never truly understand it. Since effective leadership involves mastery of self, even those with the most outstanding capacity to comprehend leadership will still feel that it has an element of residual mystery. This makes the study and practice of leadership so compelling.

The Challenging Terrain

One of the major reasons for this mystery is that the 'context' for leadership is changing profoundly. It is a context of constant and increasing challenge, and dizzying pace fuelled by advances in technology, innovation and workforce dynamics.² It is typified at one end of the spectrum by alarming uncertainty across the world and at the other by a passionate search for meaning.³ Another part of this contextual challenge for the modern leader is the pluralism and diversity caused by dramatic alterations in ethnic, gender, generational and lifestyle characteristics of the workforce.⁴

The Demographic Landscape in Australia and New Zealand

Both Australia and New Zealand, like the United States and Europe, experienced large booms in populations of people born from 1946 to 1966 (commonly called "Baby Boomers").⁵ This population boom has been followed by a decrease in birth rates and, in combination with other factors, will lead to a severe demographic trough in the working population.⁶

This demographic trough will result from the proportion of people aged 65 and over increasing, while the number of younger people entering the workforce for the first time will fall, resulting in a dramatic increase in competition for scarce skilled workers.⁷ Since the current and future ingredients for business success – innovation, competitive advantage and leadership – require people (with skills and knowledge) this is a critical issue for the future of our economies.⁸

2: The Generation Game

This paper focuses on the way Generation X and Y employees in Australia and New Zealand make sense⁹ of the leadership they see and experience today.

Of all the compelling aspects in this world of uncertainty and change in the area of leadership, why should we be interested in Generation X and Y and their understanding and expectations?

If generational attitude differences are as marked as many authors would have us believe, then this is an issue of strategic significance requiring organisations to intimately understand each generation and develop customised workforce strategies.

However, if generational attitude differences are not significant, these same broad generational customised strategies have the potential to disrupt generic workforce development, dissipate resources and erode generational harmony.¹⁰

Defining the Generational Groups

The prevalent view in popular literature is that there are multiple distinct generations in the current workforce.¹¹ These include the Silent Generation (born 1929 to 1945), the Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964), Generation X (born 1965 to 1977) and Generation Y (born 1978 to 1994). Generation Z (born 1995–2005) are nearing completion of Primary School. These generational labels and dates vary from source to source.

Australian Generational Group Definition Dates

| | Silent Generation | Baby Boomers | Generation X | Generation Y | Generation Z |
|---------------|-------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Year of Birth | 1929 – 1945 | 1946 – 1964 | 1965 – 1977 | 1978 – 1994 | 1995 – 2005 |
| Age in 2005 | 60 – 76 | 41 – 59 | 28 – 40 | 11 – 27 | 0 – 10 |

These popular authors have asserted that each generation has its own well-defined and unmistakable characteristics. These characteristics include values and principles, sense of purpose, loyalty and job security, respect for positional power, view on career development, work/life balance, learning and development and expectations of management.

Characteristics of the Silent Generation:¹²

- traditionalists with high respect for positional power
- uncomfortable with change preferring consistency
- exhibit strong loyalty and have a "job for life" expectation
- historically-focused, relying on experience to guide decision-making
- disciplined and modest in their approach to work and life
- slow adopters of technology

Characteristics of Baby Boomers:¹³

- view work from a process-orientated perspective
- value company commitment and loyalty
- believe in sacrifice in order to achieve success
- value teamwork and group discussion
- believe achievement comes after "paying dues"
- seek long-term employment but don't expect a "job for life"
- ambitious at work and in personal life, and status orientated

Characteristics of Generation X:¹⁴

- independent and resourceful with free agent approach to careers
- accepting of change and comfortable with diversity
- have high expectations of work/life balance
- they "want it now"
- technologically literate and lifelong learners

Characteristics of Generation Y:¹⁵

- self-reliant and independent with a desire for freedom and flexibility
- entrepreneurial thinkers comfortable with change and diversity
- technology and media 'savvy'
- place high value on education and skill development
- relish responsibility and want to play meaningful roles
- social responsibility is a business imperative
- have a desire for collaboration

Characteristics of Generation Z:¹⁶

- predicted to spend longer living with their parents
- predicted to marry much later than previous generations
- expected to be the most technologically advanced generation yet

3: Generational Differences: Fact or Fiction?

The existence of these distinct generational cohorts with sharp differences amongst them and, in particular, revelations of dramatic differences in youth cohorts has been advanced in the work of Tulgan (1996)¹⁷ and Zemke et al (2000)¹⁸ and other popular generational authors. This popular literature has primarily focused on the attitudes and orientations to work and life.¹⁹

In a comprehensive scientific review Jorgensen (2003)²⁰ argues that the characteristics in the popular literature have been identified through experiences and observations and that this popular research may lack the necessary rigour on which to base strategic workforce decisions.

In a deeper analysis of their claims, he has used evidence collated through a number of sources including Australian Defence Force surveys, for example, and concluded that they "do not support the notion of sharp and strong generational differences". He identifies that where divergence is evident, it may be more related to life-cycle phases rather than divergent generational values.²¹

He also identified other scientific studies that found that consistent generalisations in the popular literature and media rarely withstood the scrutiny of disciplined social science research. These included work by Sackett (2002)²², Ryder (1964; 1965)²³ and Riley et al (1988)²⁴ who found that the use only of people's ages to compare generational groups was not reliable.

Further research by Sax et al (1999)²⁵ identifies that "most indicators of youth attitudes and values change slowly and smoothly over time, if they change at all". Discrete and specific behaviours (such as response to change, attitudes to diversity and view of personal development, for example) certainly do change, but these changes do not imply fundamental changes in attitudes and values of the entire generational cohort.

A number of substantive longitudinal surveys have been undertaken on youth attitudes in the United States including National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the Youth Attitude Tracking Survey, the Alfred P Sloan Study (University of Chicago), the Youth Development Study (University of Minnesota) and, the most comprehensive, the Monitoring the Future Project in the United States (University of Michigan)²⁶, all of which have reached broadly similar conclusions. The latter study carefully examined national representative samples of youth by asking the same questions over the past 25 years to over 14,000 high school seniors annually. It found a remarkable stability in attitudes to life goals, important job characteristics and the importance of work. One factor that did demonstrate an upward trend, however, was the value assigned to tertiary education.²⁷

One of the most respected centres of leadership education and research, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) with campuses in the USA, Europe and Asia, undertook a survey of 3,417 respondents in 2003 to explore the similarities and differences between the different generational cohorts in the organisational environment. They concluded that "despite what is seen on television, heard on radio, and written in newspapers, magazines, books, the differences between generations are not as stark as we have been led to believe".²⁸ They recommended that interpretation of attitudes and behaviours based upon generational differences be treated "very, very carefully", and stressed the importance of not relying on stereotypes.

The study found, for example, that there was remarkable congruence between generations in terms of their development agenda and that all groups were most likely to seek development in the areas of leadership and skills specific to their specialist areas.

A recently published extensive literature review²⁹ conducted to better understand current stereotypes in the workplace regarding Generation X and Baby Boomers revealed that "Baby Boomers and Generation Xers are not dissimilar as employees; they possess more similarities than differences". Following this literature review, the same researchers conducted a case study to validate these generational stereotypes amongst management and staff in two railway companies. The case study corroborated the literature review findings and reasserted that the stereotypes "could not be supported and acted upon".³⁰

A further study, Kunreuther's "Generational Changes in Leadership: Implications for Social Change Organizations" (2002)³¹, also refuted the notion of large generational differences. This study, undertaken across 16 not-for-profits in the Boston and New York areas, found that "vision, communication skills, collaborative style and concern about staff were noted across all ages and position as qualities of good leadership". Although many of the issues raised by younger staff were similar to older staff, the "tone was different". Younger individuals were less confident in charting the organisations' future direction compared to their more experienced colleagues. This divergence suggests that experience and position in life cycle may be more relevant issues for consideration than broad generational difference.

In her work on this generational change project she referred to the General Social Survey 1972 – 2000 that explored differences between the generations in the literature concluding that attitudinal variation could be attributed a life cycle "phenomenon" rather than generational groupings.

These findings are supported from the social psychology angle by Vaughan and Hogg (2005)³² who note that studies of age differences in relation to susceptibility to attitude change have suggested various models of change across the life span that have little to do with generational effects.

4: The Voice of the Generations – The Acid Test

We wanted to gain an insight into the leadership perceptions of Generation X and Y and discover whether their views on leadership varied as dramatically as the popular literature claimed or whether the groups displayed the similarities that the academic researchers asserted. In addition, we were interested to see if there were subtler life cycle and situational effects in any attitudinal variation.

For this reason, we conducted focus groups with individuals from Generations X and Y in Australia and New Zealand. These individuals were invited to contribute in a meaningful way to employers' understanding of how Generation X and Y make sense of leadership. Participants were advised that the outcomes of this pilot study would raise questions that would form the basis for thoughtful consideration regarding the leadership we have and the leadership we need in order to fully engage Generation X and Y. This pilot work could form the basis of a deeper exploration of this area in due course.

Methodology

Focus groups were used in this pilot study primarily to ensure that both agreement (consensus) and disagreement (diversity) amongst the participants could be explored and assessed (Morgan 1993; 1996)³⁹. The strength of focus groups lies in the potential for concepts to be discussed from both an individual and collective perspective. Thus at times individuals would express their view one after the other, and at other times a debate and discussion were constructed. Thus in typical focus group fashion, the group would challenge or build on individual statements or questions.

There were two facilitators present in each focus group with one of those doing all four groups and the other doing three of them. Each focus group followed a sequence of pre-prepared questions so that the different groups followed a standardised format. However, facilitators were asked to further actively inquire, debate and question participants in a spontaneous and conversational manner, which led ultimately to a far more semi-structured form of data collection.

Focus groups typically lasted 90 minutes. Focus group data was audio taped and one of the facilitators took comprehensive notes. This data was later transcribed and all four of the authors worked through the data focusing primarily on word and thematic patterns. A feature of this paper has been the authors' ability to work both individually and collectively with the data, ensuring consistency, validity and dialogue.

Wherever possible, quotations from participants have been used in their exact form although occasionally minor amendments have been made to remove superfluous words, slang and incorrect grammar.

Focus Group Participant Analysis

Age Breakdown

| | No. of respondents | Age range | Male | Female |
|-------|--------------------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Gen X | 21 | 27 – 40 | 10 (48%) | 11 (52%) |
| Gen Y | 20 | 20 – 26 | 6 (30%) | 14 (70%) |

Industry Breakdown

| Employment sector | Gen X | Gen Y |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Business consulting | 1 | 2 |
| Public sector | 3 | 6 |
| Communications | 4 | 2 |
| Financial Services | 4 | 5 |
| Health | 1 | 1 |
| Hospitality | – | 1 |
| Law | 2 | – |
| Retail | 1 | – |
| Utilities | – | 1 |
| General | 5 | 2 |
| TOTAL | 21 | 20 |

19.5% of respondents were from New Zealand, 80.5% of respondents were from Australia.

5: Learnings Snapshot: Key Findings

- Widespread stereotypes of the two generations are contradicted by the study. Employees across generations were found to exhibit more similarities than differences, suggesting it is unwise to base strategic workforce decisions solely on anecdotal evidence or popular literature notions of distinct generational differences.
- Where divergence between Generations X and Y was noted, the findings suggested the influence of life cycle and situational phenomena rather than generational differences 'across the board'. These phenomena included level of experience, financial and family commitments, depth of personal development, political awareness and emotional maturity.

Feedback is the breakfast of champions

- The study found that great leadership increases commitment and enhances retention of employees. Also, both groups crave appreciation, feedback and the opportunity for meaningful learning. However, appreciation and feedback were more important to Generation Y than to Generation X, and the opportunity for meaningful learning was more important to Generation X than to Generation Y.
- Managers are increasingly being asked to take a role of teacher and steward, with individuals expecting skilled coaching and mentoring.
- The study concludes that there is a need to provide employees with a balance of autonomy and support. They expect and hope that good leaders can provide both of these. One-on-one support, coaching, mentoring and role modelling are the types of support most appreciated by both X and Y generations.

When it comes to leadership... what's in a title?

- People no longer equate position title and technical knowledge with leadership. Relying on formal authority and knowledge is not enough to secure the commitment of employees. They follow people they believe in, those with qualities they admire rather than those that they report to.

Personal leadership style builds credibility, lifts team performance

- Authentic leadership is of critical importance. Managers must develop their own leadership style; being a carbon copy of other leaders within the organisation is no longer acceptable. Organisations need to be very thoughtful when assessing the options for developing the leadership ability of employees.
- Today's employees want to see the modern manager learning, experimenting, making mistakes, being inspired, and seeking answers and solutions. In the current context it is no longer possible to be the all-knowing, all-solving manager...nor is it expected.
- There is a strong link between how a team performs and the quality and style of leadership. Good leadership is rewarded with inspired people making an extraordinary effort. Bad leadership at best means less than 100%, at worst means unmotivated staff with one foot out the door.

The workforce of the future

- Contrary to many of the stereotypes, the study revealed individuals in Generation X *and* Y who were resourceful, independent, collaborative, curious and seeking intellectual and personal challenge through work.

6: Research Insights

The Manager Needs to Lead Views on Leadership and Management

Generation X

Generation X individuals identify a difference between management (which they see as technical and task-focused) and leadership (which they see as creating a sense of purpose, inspiration and alignment). They are convinced that those in management positions need leadership skills and the greater leadership capacity they have, the more effective they will be as a manager. They look to managers for leadership skills such as strategic thinking, motivation, effective communication, constructive conflict management and team building. They appreciate managers with strong coaching and mentoring capability. They do not see the manager and the leader as separate, they see them as integrated in one person.

What are they saying:

- "It is now the expectation of a manager to be a leader as well."
- "We really value leadership qualities in our management."
- "Management is leadership, leadership is management."
- "Now, the manager needs to lead."

Generation Y

Generation Y individuals, whilst recognising some difference between management and leadership, did not have as clear a demarcation as the Generation X individuals had. Generation Y saw leadership in those that gave them scope, autonomy and opportunity, rather than those who would give them direction, regulation and commands. Like Generation X, they did strongly perceive that they needed and wanted managers to have leadership qualities.

What are they saying:

- "I find it really hard to put them into two different boxes because for me it's such a blurred line."
- "After many months I'm starting to work out the difference between leadership and management."
- "When you're being managed you're being told what to do, but if you're being led, if someone is a leader, they give you more responsibility and so you take ownership of the task and see it through."
- "There are people who you have to report to, but they might not be the same people who you look to for direction."

Message for the Manager

It doesn't matter whether you are the Chief Executive or a team leader. It's not enough to pay attention to tasks, you need to pay attention to people. People at every level are looking for leadership. If you can't or won't provide it, people will go looking for it elsewhere.

If You Want Performance, Lead Me

Views on Leadership and Performance

Generation X

Generation X individuals believe high performance in their organisation is directly linked to the quality of the organisation's leadership. On a personal level, they are convinced that their career progress will be directly affected by the quality of the leadership they demonstrate and consequently development of leadership skills is critical to them.

They want to be challenged in a meaningful way and they need a sense of ownership and engagement if they are to perform to their potential. They needed to be inspired to lift their performance above the ordinary. They also believe that the more opportunity they have to learn and develop, the more they will achieve for their organisation.

What they are saying:

- "You float on the people beneath you."
- "I look to my manager for what I can learn from them."
- "The ones who want to engage you more as a person are the ones that make the real difference."
- "We're at our best when we want to be better."
- "The best way to get good results is to give people ownership of their work."
- "I felt like he was lifting me up."
- "If you can inspire someone, they will do more than you ask because they care."

Generation Y

Many of the same factors as Generation X individuals came up again for Generation Y individuals, such as the importance of ownership, engagement and learning. Generation Y were strong on aspiration with their performance clearly related to their strong desire for achievement. They strongly held the view that personalised leadership made the difference in encouraging them to go the "extra mile" for an organisation. What was striking was that both generations are very good corporate

citizens if they feel nurtured, challenged and valued. They want and expect to over-perform as long as, in their eyes, the organisation's leadership warrants it.

What they are saying:

- "My performance depends on how I am led."
- "Last year I was given all the leadership in the world and I achieved things that I'm very proud of as a result."
- "If I'm really motivated, I really want to over-achieve."
- "If I am given a really great vision of what we want to do by my manager then I want to do more than is expected."
- "If you don't like what you're doing, get out."
- "If I worked in a company where I didn't respect any of the managers and leaders, I would probably end up leaving."
- "If we're not being appreciated and don't have anything to aspire to....well, why do we want to be here?"

Message for the Manager

There is a strong link between how your team performs and the leadership you provide. Good leadership is rewarded with inspired people making an extraordinary effort. At best, poor leadership means your team is operating at less than 100%. At worst, poor leadership means demotivated, unhappy people who have one foot out the door.

You Can't Learn It From a Book

Views on Leadership Development

Generation X

Generation X individuals believe that the best way to learn leadership is experiential, relational and hands-on. This is best achieved by taking advantage of leadership opportunities in their own work context. Often this is "just in time" leadership development, because they are learning at a time appropriate to their personal needs, career development and very real organisational imperatives. They respect authenticity, which is why they see the workplace as their learning environment.

They are critical of what they see as a "glut of leadership material" and feel that much of the leadership education and literature on offer has not helped their managers' leadership development significantly.

What they are saying:

- "Leadership is stuff you can't just read in a book."
- "There are books, courses, whatever it might be....but the real challenge is authenticity because we all know when we have a good leader."
- "I think a lot more people now have done courses in leadership, whether they're in those roles or not, so they know the textbook approach to what leadership is....but that's only part of the story."

Generation Y

Generation Y individuals expressed a strong preference to learn from role models. Indeed, in many cases, they were actively and consciously seeking these leadership role models. Whilst Generation X individuals want experiential learning for their leadership development, Generation Y individuals want managers who are teachers and can help them grow and improve.

Like Generation X, much of their leadership development is progressed "just in time" when they know they need particular new skills in their repertoire.

What they are saying:

- "I think that in order for me to gain leadership skills and grow as a team leader, I have to have a role model in my life that I can look up to, ask questions and seek guidance from."
- "If there was no one in my company that I aspired to be like, there would be no way that I would be able to become a leader.....because how would I learn to act?"
- "If I wanted to know how to act in a certain situation or how to deal with a challenge, I would go to my mentor, someone who I'm personally close to."
- "If you're being encouraged, properly supported and the atmosphere is very positive, you're much more likely to do your job well."

Message for the Manager

It is vital that managers develop their own leadership ability. However, the cookie-cutter approach to leadership development is no longer acceptable. Effective and authentic leadership development is a necessity, and organisations need to be critical in assessing the options for developing leadership in their organisation.

People Will Leave Managers, But Will Stay for Leaders Views on Retention of Staff

Generation X

Generation X individuals tend to leave when they are over-managed and under-led. They abhor micromanagement, preferring a hands-off approach with the emphasis on delegation. Whilst they relish this independence, they are ironically very reliant on continual feedback and crave appreciation.

The most powerful incentive that will make them stay within the organisation is the opportunity for meaningful learning, whether professional, personal or career related. Learning what is meaningful involves challenge, growth, being stretched and the ability to try something new or different. They interpret boredom and disengagement at work as a sign that they have reached the end of their learning potential with that organisation.

They are very critical of inconsistency and organisational hypocrisy.

What they are saying:

- "People leave managers not leaders."
- "We've got to have good leaders, because that's how we retain people."
- "Without learning something, it's inevitable that you're not going to be there for much longer."
- "I can't sustain this because I'm not growing, I'm not developing, and I'm not feeling inspired so I'll start to look at leaving."
- "If my managers are ineffective I feel empowered to say I don't need to stick with you buddy, I'll go and get another job."
- "You reckon we want one-on-one feedback, they (Generation Y) want feedback every two minutes!"

Generation Y

Certainly there is much more talk by Generation Y individuals of being prepared to leave their job. However, when explicitly asked, none of them had done so. They voice a certainty that leaving their job is very much an option if they do not feel appreciated, motivated and challenged. They project a far greater degree of impatience than Generation X. It's not so much an impatience to race through the ranks and be out of the organisation. Rather, it's an impatience to know what they don't know, to convert that potential to reality, to prove themselves to themselves (and others) and to get some achievements under their belt. To these ends, they talk about goals, direction, and the next step with a real urgency.

Whilst still a feature, the importance of learning opportunities did not have the same level of emphasis as it did with Generation X individuals.

An inspiring vision, a motivated team and a 'whiff of success' provided powerful reasons to stay with an employer.

What they are saying:

- "They already know that we're not going to be the generation that stays in their company for 20 years, so there have to be reasons to stay. There need to be things that motivate us and challenge us."
- "They have to think more dynamically in terms of our career plans."
- "Often you see people as leaders, as the people who are role models for you, someone you want to become. We are looking at those great communicators who get everyone working and enthused and get great results. We want to be with those people and become like those people."
- "I have to be able to move onward and upward."
- "I don't think I'm impatient. I'm trying to figure out where I want to go. I'm not just wanting to get to the next level as fast as I can."

Message for the Manager

Leadership increases commitment and enhances retention of employees. More specifically, it is leadership that provides greater opportunities for learning and development, with attention paid to matching the right people with the right job, making the roles meaningful for the individual.

We Decide Whom We'll Follow

Views on Identification of Leaders

Generation X

Generation X individuals do not equate leadership with authority, position or title. They do not automatically regard their immediate manager or supervisor as a leader. They are more likely to identify those people with strong people skills as leaders, rather than those with technical expertise. Overall, to them, leaders are people of any age, position and expertise who make an impact and influence others.

What they are saying:

- "If I need something done, instead of going through the proper channels which will take me ages, I just target the people I need to get decisions made."

- "I'm meant to report to one person, but I've actually adopted three people, because I think they've all got something unique that I can learn from."
- "The way we talk about leadership, we're talking about people above us. I mean what about people next to us, people below us?"
- "I don't trust my senior management, so what I do is I try to influence the people I work with."

Generation Y

Generation Y individuals identify themselves as 'leaders in waiting'. They are very clear that they get different things from immediate leaders (know-how and feedback) than from senior leaders (inspiration). Like Generation X, they will seek leadership and direction from people of influence regardless of their position or status. They will bypass their manager and look to their own role models, influencers and mentors. Influence and leadership, in other words, sit well outside the formal hierarchy.

What they are saying:

- "When I think of leadership, I think about all the people in our company, from those with two years' experience right up to our CEO."
- "In reality, I see leadership in the people that I work with and interact with...not just the person that's my manager."
- "From your immediate manager you expect feedback and guidance, but from senior management, you expect motivation and encouragement."
- "I expect different things from different levels of leaders. From my immediate manager, I want someone who moves obstacles, but from someone like the CEO I look for inspiration."

Message for the Manager

People no longer equate position and technical knowledge with leadership. Relying on your formal authority and knowledge is not enough to secure the commitment of your employees. They follow people they believe in, those with credibility and qualities they admire rather than those in the right position in an organisation.

Know Me, Trust Me, Support Me ...Lead Me!

Views on What is Wanted from Leadership

Generation X

Generation X individuals want trust and autonomy alongside mentoring, advice and one-on-one engagement. They look to their leaders for organisational positioning and career progression. They want to be seen and treated as an individual but they don't want "enough rope to hang themselves" or be left to their own devices completely. They are not subversive in wanting to overturn the status quo and there was virtually no talk of making a difference or wanting to change things dramatically. While they certainly can be cynical and suspicious, they don't appear political. They have a real unwillingness to give feedback to their leaders or comment on their leadership and certainly are not brash or courageous in how they 'manage or lead upwards'.

What they are saying:

- "I think it's about being realistic about what can be achieved."
- "Just let me do it and put a lot of trust in me."
- "What I see as true leadership is someone who lives the values of my company."
- "I admire people who can bring my personal values closer to my work values."
- "Reinforcing career management and the ability to help me progress my career within the company is important to me."
- "Even with a good leader I don't feel I could give them feedback. I just think that I think it's not really my place."
- "I can talk about issues, decisions, concepts and so on, but not about their leadership styles."

Generation Y

Generation Y individuals want to be offered leadership opportunities but they were quite clear that their own leaders should keep the accountability. They wanted practice at leadership but were explicit about wanting help, nurturing, support and direction. Like Generation X individuals, they wanted engagement on a personal level with their leaders (including the most senior management). Unlike Generation X individuals, they were comfortable at managing up and giving feedback. They saw this as part of adding value and making a difference and they seem quite sure they want to do both. They were much more comfortable with risk and crossing boundaries and saw this as a bonus of their unencumbered youth.

What they are saying:

- "I like the opportunity to be led while being a leader. It's having the support because really, the reality is I'm a future leader, I have the potential to be a leader, I'm not there yet."
- "We don't have all the answers even though I know some of us think that we do. We need support."
- "I don't want to pay for my immaturity."
- "I like being able to make decisions for myself, but at this stage I don't mind being puppeteered."
- "Know what drives me, know what drives the next person. They might be two completely different things and with that knowledge you'll build successful teams."
- "Some of them (Generation X) just do their jobs and have lost faith. They don't push those boundaries anymore."

Message for the Manager

Provide your employees with a balance of autonomy and support. They expect and hope that good leaders can provide both of these. One-on-one support, coaching, mentoring and role modelling are the types of support most appreciated.

Don't Get All Creative on Me!

Views on Leadership and Creativity

Generation X

Generation X individuals don't appear to like the term 'creativity'. They don't identify with being creative or even feel it is necessary for leaders to be so. They find it either hopelessly unpractical or a cliché – a bit of rhetoric. They feel it is used when their bosses don't know the answer. None seem to be excited by creativity whatsoever, but they seem to immediately identify with difference and diversity and see that as more important.

What they are saying:

- "You don't have to be overly creative to make change. Often it's very obvious what needs to be done."
- "I don't mean to be cynical but I've seen the word 'creativity' misused so often, it's like water off a duck's back."

Generation Y

Generation Y individuals are just as anti-creativity as Generation X. They aren't cynical but they are astonishingly pragmatic. They like making things simple not complex and they like being different (the only meaning of creativity they identify with). They seem to relate more to problem solving. They see creativity as an individual, not a collective property and one that can hinder the acceptability and timing of their work. They also seem to associate creativity as exclusive and excluding of people rather than a collective ability or possibility.

What they are saying:

- "Creativity can hinder what you are trying to achieve."
- "I'm creative through being pragmatic."
- "There's not necessarily a need for creativity."
- "Pragmatism in some cases is actually admitting that you don't know the answer and working a lot closer with those people around you."
- "If they're really creative then they're often called nut cases."

Message for the Manager

In the face of an uncertain future, creativity is vital to an organisation's survival. Using 'creativity' to get more for less from your staff (e.g. 'We don't have the budget, so you'll just have to be creative'), or failing to follow through in a practical sense, has eroded the value of this critical skill in the eyes of employees. Managers need to understand the value of creativity as part of effective leadership, and develop it responsibly.

You Say Impatient, I Say Ambitious

Views on Pace and Urgency of Modern Leadership

Generation X

While displaying an urgency to progress, Generation X individuals do not seem to share the infamous impatience of their Generation Y counterparts of which they are well aware.

What are they saying:

- "If I get bored then I go somewhere else."
- "You've got to move quickly. It's a lot tighter than it has been in the past."
- "There's definitely a generation gap. It's taken me seven years to get here. They (Generation Y) have been here for three years and they expect to be in my position in a couple of months' time."
- "We're at our best when we want to be better."

Generation Y

In many respects, Generation Y individuals exude impatience and dynamism but it is tempered because they want the credibility that goes with spending enough time to know their work and profession thoroughly. Pace is rapid but not rapacious and they can rein it in for a while to actually learn.

What are they saying:

- "We all want to go whoosh to the top."
- "I don't think I'm impatient. I'm trying to figure out where I want to go."
- "You need to gain credibility before you gain pace. I wouldn't want to be 35 and managing a large group of people and know that half of them are just laughing behind my back because I don't understand what I'm doing."

Message for the Manager

The pace of change is increasing, the time spent in roles is shorter, and the expectations of the emerging workforce are in line with that. This is not merely generational – it is a reflection of changing times. Learn to harness that ambition or impatience, rather than merely tolerate it.

7: The Leadership Challenge

What Does it all Mean?

The popular literature has shaped a view about generational differences that is already starting to drive workforce strategies in many Australasian organisations. In a way this is a positive step as it signals a willingness from organisations to move away from a "one size fits all" workforce development policy.

However, scientific researchers have argued that whilst popular literature views of generational groupings may be "engaging, entertaining and intuitively appealing"³⁴ they are in actual fact "little more than caricature – exaggerated and distorted to engage popular interest"³⁵. They see no clear evidence of discrete and highly distinctive generational groups. The belief that there are large and dramatic differences among youth cohorts in different generations has not been supported by high-quality longitudinal research.³⁶

The findings of this study support the scientific view that generational attitude change tends to occur gradually and in a limited form. We discovered far more similarities than differences in the views held by Generation X and Y individuals on leadership.

This congruence was particularly strong in their views of:

- Leadership and Performance – they share similar views on the importance of ownership, engagement and learning to perform
- Identification of Leaders – they select their own leaders on a basis of their leadership capacity rather than reporting lines.
- Leadership and Creativity – they have a common view that "creativity" is rhetoric.

The similarities, while still evident, were less marked in their views of:

- Leadership and Management – while they both recognise a difference between management and leadership, Generation X have a clearer demarcation.
- Leadership Development – it holds critical importance to both groups (and both groups hold a similarly strong aversion to learning leadership from more formal management training), but Generation X express a preference for experiential development, whilst Generation Y have a preference for learning from role models.
- Retention of Staff – both groups strongly craved appreciation and feedback (but this was more important to Generation Y than to Generation X) and opportunity for meaningful learning (although this was more important to Generation X than to Generation Y).
- What is wanted from Leadership – both generations want one-on-one engagement with their leaders. However, Generation Y

are much more comfortable at managing upwards and giving feedback.

- Pace and Urgency – they both exhibit a level of urgency, with Generation Y demonstrating more impatience. However, the research did not find the fabled reckless impatience that is attributed to Generation Y.

Where the similarities were less marked and divergence was noted, findings from the research suggest these to be a life cycle and situational phenomenon rather than the result of discrete generational groupings. These findings are consistent with those previously described by Kunreuther (2002)³⁷ and Jorgensen (2003)³⁸. The key life cycle-related and situational influences of the respondents included level of experience, level of financial and family commitments, depth of personal development, political awareness and emotional maturity. The study's findings on impatience and urgency, for example, can be interpreted as related primarily to respective levels of experience of these individuals in organisational life and the liberating effect of lower personal encumbrment.

The findings mirror those of Kunreuther in that the similarity of views between the generations runs counter to the claims made about distinct and often dramatic generational differences in the popular literature. We would agree with her view that, where there was divergence, this was reflective of a "different meaning attributed to the same behaviours (or attitudes)". We believe it is this subtle but critical interpretation that underlies the perception that many managers currently hold of the younger workforce and the different birth cohorts within that workforce. For example, the research found both groups placed significant emphasis on personal development, but the modern manager needs to recognise that this has different meanings for different people (what is coaching for one is hands-on experience for another).

Our study did not support the widespread stereotype that Generation X individuals are generally disengaged, disloyal and lazy and nor did it substantiate the popular image of Generation Y individuals as overindulged, self-absorbed agitators. It revealed individuals aged 20 to 40 years who were resourceful, independent (but not so independent that they did not desire or seek support), collaborative, curious and seeking intellectual and personal challenge through meaningful work.

Therefore, we believe that there is not sufficient evidence to justify re-contouring the strategic approach to workforce development based on perceived distinctions between Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y.

However, we are deeply concerned that the current focus and attention on generational differences in workforce policy development is obscuring a more real and profound workforce dynamic challenge – the importance of developing leadership that connects effectively with individuals.

8: Leadership Imperatives for the Modern Manager

For all generations in the workforce, the context is characterised by uncertainty, doubt and unpredictability³⁹. Rapid advances in technology, innovation and workforce dynamics are the backdrop for increasing diversity and pluralism. Those grappling for direction in this turmoil want greater meaning to what they do – both alone and with those they work. The leadership approaches that address the current context and the needs of all individuals regardless of their age are:

- **Find a better balance between autonomy and support for individuals and teams**
The findings of this research substantiate the idea that there is no substitute for direct, personal contact with employees (Wheatley 2002)⁴⁰. Individuals are asking for "high touch" development through skilled coaching and mentoring. Managers are being asked to take a role of teacher and steward. At the same time, individuals and teams want greater responsibility, autonomy, greater access to relevant information and increased opportunities. Recognition is a key performance driver for employees at every level.
- **Focus less on compliance to foster greater commitment**
With the workforce desire for "supported autonomy", less authoritarian cultures will drive workplace strategy. Self-managed teams can create more commitment and participation, with better distributed decision-making and access to information. These groups need not be reliant on consensus, but on skilled communication and commitment to overarching shared goals or vision. Managers who avoid an over-focus on systems, documentation and compliance detail will have more space to develop their teams.
- **Assist individuals and teams to find meaning in their roles**
Commitment can be further nurtured by keeping meaning in the forefront – Why are we doing this? How will it help? Is this work contributing to some sort of greater good? It is important to spend time with employees to understand what motivates each individual, what inspires them, and how their values link with their role. Performance will increase when your people know you care about their overall development as well as the tasks they undertake.
- **Higher engagement – more relationship**
Our study also shows that increasingly, the workforce is looking for more contact with their managers who engage with them in a highly personalised way. Good managers make themselves available for their people on an informal basis, to talk through a project, to brainstorm possibilities, to listen to ideas and to offer

encouragement. Leadership happens "alongside" and in the moment.

- **More opportunities for individual and collective learning**
As individuals and groups of employees wrestle with the difficulties of the context, strategies are needed which encourage learning capability and infrastructure to support learning at all levels. Learning happens through the encouragement of personal reflection and the ability to examine underlying assumptions.
- **Develop, develop, develop your people!**
Over and above basic skills training, the modern employee wants to be challenged, mentally stretched and have development opportunities that help them integrate new understanding into the workplace. Employees working in unpredictable conditions want experiential, action-based learning. This can occur in project teams, cross-sectional work groups and in conversation with others who work in different areas and hold different perspectives. Taking time to discuss development with each individual will help you to co-create development options.
- **"Show up" for yourself and your people**
Today's employees want to see the modern manager learning, experimenting, making mistakes, being inspired and seeking answers and solutions. In the current context it is no longer possible to be the all-knowing manager, fully in control and never having doubts. Your people will be inspired and reassured by you being transparent, sharing your challenges, hopes and fears.
- **More leadership development**
Our study indicates that workplace training and development needs to further emphasise leadership development and distinguish between a leadership and a management focus. Employees want experiential elements included in leadership development, and this is achieved best over a longer time period and embedded in the daily context of diversity and complexity. Leadership which goes beyond the hero leader to encourage shared leadership will enhance all other workplace strategies which respond to the needs of all generations.

- **Innovative, flexible and competitive organisations need creativity**

Creativity will flourish in an environment of optimism and possibility where thinking by free association, risk-taking and experimentation are encouraged. The prevalent corrosive practice of micro-management, highly fragmented workdays and imposition of arbitrary and impossible deadlines is most unlikely to encourage individuals and groups to be creative in their approach to both problems and opportunities.

9: Conclusion

Organisations must adapt to today's faster paced environment of remarkable complexity and increasing diversity. Additionally, over the next five to seven years the modern organisation has to prepare for a demographic trough that will cause a serious shortage of skilled workers. In this formidable context, organisations wanting to maintain a competitive edge require strong leadership and need to be smart and proactive in their strategic workforce decision-making.

This paper concludes that it is unwise to base strategic workforce decisions on popular literature notions of distinct generational attitudinal differences alone. Generational difference may in fact be a mirage since we found that employees across generations exhibit more similarities than differences.

We strongly recommend that organisations rethink their leadership and development approaches. They need to develop customised workplace strategies that take close account of individual differences and contextual factors. The reason is that employees require personalised attention, greater support and recognition whilst craving more autonomy, independence and access to information. Managers need to pay attention to relationships alongside their technical and task focus. Employees will not tolerate overly authoritarian cultures and without question, they want learning and development opportunities that help them to capture their potential and give meaning to their work.

The voices in the study are emphatic in their demand for high quality leaders and managers with exceptional leadership.

The challenge for managers and researchers, if they are prepared to accept it, is to more deeply understand the individualised needs of the workforce, the most effective leadership development processes and the right leadership mindset.

Appendices

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